

Prince Herscherik and
Kingdom of sorrow

ハーシェリク

転生王子の国の大転生

楠のびる

Illust. あり子



Herscherik

– Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light –

- Volume 1 -

Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom of Sorrow

-Author-

Kusunoki Nobiru

-Illustrator-

Arico

[fuwafuwatales | Isecai | Caelum (Blob Translations)]

- STORY -

The day prior to female otaku Hayakawa Ryouko's 35th birthday, she departed the world in a traffic accident. As she opened her eyes again, she was reincarnated into a beautiful blonde-haired prince of a great kingdom in fantasy world.

In that great kingdom... In Greisis kingdom, there's a king despised by his retainers, tyrant nobles, corrupt officials, and so on... It's in a precarious situation.

For the sake of protecting his father and family, as well as helping the citizens, the reincarnated Prince Herscherik is determined to fight.

Making use of his skill as an office clerk in the past, being full of initiative in his nature along with his (otaku-ish) intellect, the reincarnated prince faces many kinds of incidents.



ハーシェリク

Prince Herscherik and
Kingdom of sorrow

転生王子憂いの大国

楠のびる illust. あり子

バルバッセ侯爵

グレイシス王国の大臣

寵姫

ハーシェリクの母親
既に他界している

ソルイエ

グレイシス王国国王
ハーシェリクの父

ルーク

ソルイエの筆頭執事

ルゼリア伯爵

グレイシス王国辺境の領主

ハーシェリク(早川綾子)

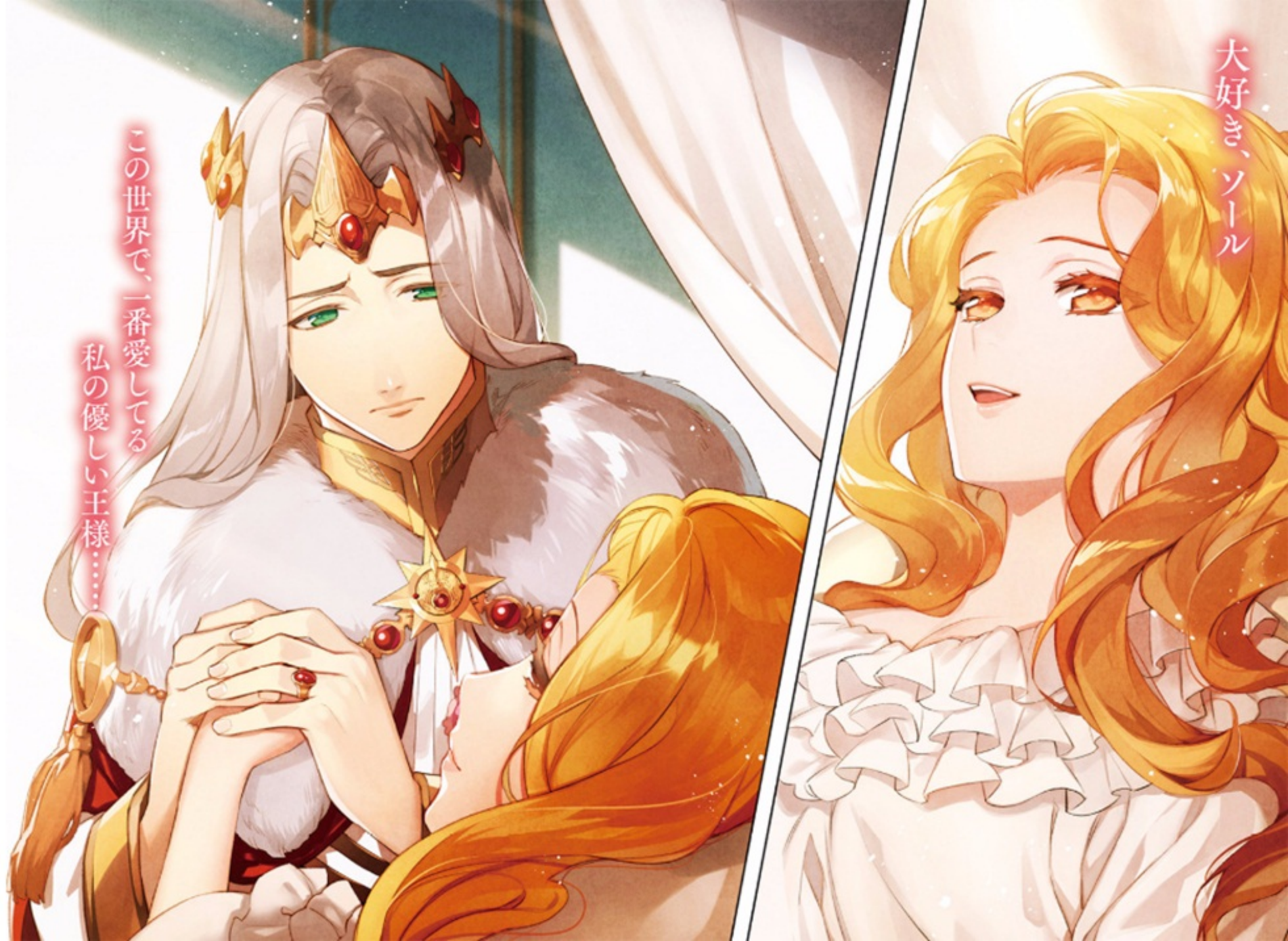
グレイシス王国第七王子
前世では三十四歳の
オタク女性

クロ

『影の牙』と
呼ばれる密偵

大好き、ソール

この世界で、一番愛してる
私の優しい王様……



ただ一つだけ、

約束をして欲しい

私より先に死ぬことは

絶対に許さない

あなたが死ぬときは、

私も死ぬときだ



伯爵、傍にいるよね
私は、逃げないよ

絶対、変える
守ってみせる



Prologue

Unexpected Downpour, Game, and Traffic Accident

That day, Hayakawa Ryouko's life ended.

She was a normal woman that can be found anywhere.

Her family was composed of five people, her parents and two little sisters. If anything, because she was the eldest daughter, her sense of responsibility is strong. However, she was a person with no particular outstanding talent and even her looks are normal.

The only difference she had to the general public was that she loved games, manga and novels since childhood and was not able to break away from that.

She frequented manga cafe instead of participating in group dates. She was more absorbed in games rather than marriage hunting. Instead of fully enjoying the sea in summer, she gave priority to lining up in Comic Market and acquiring spoils of war — she was that kind of hardcore *otaku* that before she knew it, she was already over 30 years old.

“My boyfriend won't come out of the screen.”

When asked about marriage, towards the eldest daughter who said that with a straight face, the parents said “*Ah, this child is really hopeless,*” as if realizing various meanings.

She stuck her tongue out at the relatives who seemed embarrassed deep inside while adding, “*cause they're two-dimensional,*” to which she got a severe scolding from her mother later on. She winced at her mother's fists but fortunately, the attacks stopped shortly thanks to her relatives setting up a marriage interview.

Such woman worked as an office staff at the headquarters of a certain company listed in the stock exchange. Because her income was a little higher than others of the same sex and generation, she got a loan and purchased an apartment near her parent's home during her late 20's, in consideration of their old age.

She neither had intention to marry nor she had a lover. She aimed for early full payment but if by any chance she got married, living in the apartment is alright and selling it is fine, too. She looked forward to a quiet, carefree life alone while focusing on her parents and the life of old age.

She gave priority to her hobby even with her job as an office worker in a company. She trained a junior and before she knew it, the junior obtained a departmental position. While shedding tears as the junior she painstakingly raised became in-charged of another department, she trained another one again... she spent everyday productively. She had no doubt that this kind of life will continue until her retirement age.

However, this daily life that never changed for the better abruptly ended.

The day before her 35th birthday, although it was near winter rather than deep autumn, there was a sudden rain when she left the company after working overtime. It was cold and the visibility was bad, the striking rain was so noisy that it seemed as if the ground will be hollowed out.

“The forecast said it will be just a drizzle.”

Ryouko took out her favorite folding umbrella from the bag while sighing. There was a low chance of rain according to the morning weather forecast and even if it will rain, it would immediately stop. The forecast was totally wrong.

(I can eat dinner somewhere while taking shelter from the rain but there's something I need to do today... Idiot rain.)

Ryouko sighed while getting fed up inwardly. For Ryouko, today did not only mean as the day before her 35th birthday. It is the long-awaited release date of the new *otome* game Ryouko has been waiting for for more than half a year.

Nevertheless, it's regrettable that she had to work overtime. Usually, she doesn't work overtime. She leaves her seat at fixed time, disregarding the imploring gazes of her co-workers. However, the boss entrusted a job that must be finished today no matter what. It was the sad fate of a working adult who cannot decline.

However, time will not turn back no matter how much she regrets. In order to obtain the game even a little earlier and increase her playtime, she opened the umbrella and jogged to her favorite game shop.

Her intended game shop was a favorite shop from high school days.

The reason why she still reserve and buy in a store even though it could be ordered online and sent to one's home nowadays, was because she was acquainted to female clerk who kept with the latest productions and she could reserve products that couldn't actually be reserved.

Even if it was somewhat embarrassing for a woman past her 30's to purchase, she did not have any regrets if she can passionately talk about her fetish with the clerk.

"Oh! The signal changed!"

Her monologues increased after she began living alone. Saying retorts while watching television was a daily occurrence.

The traffic light with a long waiting time in front of her was the last barrier to her destination. Moreover, in this cold temperature and heavy rain, waiting for a long time was tough.

Besides, a folding umbrella is inadequate to defend against a heavy rain. Even her newly-bought boots, favorite coat and expensive branded bag were soaked wet due to the rain.

Ryouko broke into a run and began crossing the pedestrian lane. The bad visibility and her head filled with the game she will be playing after this, reduced her attentiveness remarkably.

The moment Ryouko stepped on the second white line of the crosswalk, a horn reverberated as if tearing up the sound of the rain.

When she turned her head towards the sound, pure white light followed by a dull crash changed into the sky and the ground like a slow-motion.

Finally, a thud-like sound echoed, the scenery disappeared from her vision and it became pitch-dark.

(Ah, I need to contact *onee-san* and tell her I won't be able to go today...)

Though Ryouko was thinking about such thing, her consciousness stopped snappily

as if a switch had been pushed.

Hayakawa Ryouko, who was living an ordinary life, met her quick demise in a traffic accident the day before she turned 35.

Chapter 1

Reincarnation, Tiny Autumn Leaves, and Squishy Cheeks

Through the darkness, the scenery spread out in an instant. It became bright as if an illumination was suddenly placed before her and Hayakawa Ryouko squinted her eyes. And when the dim view gradually became clear, there was a porridge-like meal she had no memory of and a spoon being gripped by a hand in front of her.

“Uuuh?”

Together with that remark that came out of her mouth, Ryouko dropped the spoon she was holding to the plate. The impact of the spoon falling into the plate with the porridge-like substance made it splatter and soil her clothes. The spoon jumped out of the plate and made a sound as it rolled on top of the table.

The clean tabletop was stained with the porridge. The small sigh of a woman reached the ears of Ryouko who stiffened, unable to understand the situation.

When Ryouko slowly turned to that direction, a woman who looked around 20 years old with brown hair pulled back to a bun and wearing a simple but elegant dress was smiling wryly. *Slightly drooping big brown eyes are charming, men around the world will surely want to protect her*, Ryouko thought.

The woman picked up the fallen spoon, wiped it with a dish cloth and placed it on the tray on top of the side cart. Then she moved the plate still filled with porridge to a place unreachable to Ryouko and promptly tidied up the tabletop. Lastly, she wiped Ryouko’s soiled clothes with a napkin.

“There, it’s clean.”

The woman said so and smiled. The baby wanted to do it by himself and because she knows he cannot eat properly, this was within her assumption.

However, for the perpetrator who made the disaster on the table, for Hayakawa

Ryouko, the current situation was beyond the range of assumption and was a bolt out of the blue.

“Uh? Uwa?... Uuh?”

First, she cannot talk very well. The expressions that came out of her mouth were not words but merely sounds. Even when she tried moving her body, she can just barely flap her arms and legs. Her fingers do not move as she expected.

Ryouko turned her head and look at her right hand. It was a fair-skinned, small hand similar to a baby's. The white, small, maple leaf-like hand opened and closed slower than she expected.

(What the heck is this? A dream? A dream, but on my perspective!?!... No, no, wait a moment, I've become awesome. I'm the type of woman who can do anything once I put my mind on it.)

Ryouko was on the verge of panic but tried to persuade herself to calm down. By the way, her mother always told her she was stupid because she refused to do something even though she was able to do it.

Ryouko looked at her left hand next. The small, white hand moved according to her thoughts. However, the movement is very sluggish like the right hand.

(A dream of the reincarnation manga I read the other day? Or rather, a novel? Which reminds me, I remember I played a game like this, too.)

Ryouko remembered the manga, novel and game she was recently addicted to. Before she knew it, a female high school student was already a different person in another world, thereupon a romance drama with handsome men unfolded. The body she reicarnated into had a beautiful appearance that was unimaginable in Japan, she had reflexes that would even astonish an Olympic athlete and was the possessor of superior magic power...

Such woman was once pressed by her earnest childhood friend, the knight once pledged his allegiance to her while anguishing over his romantic feelings, and she even captivated the villain at one stage...

(The villain's defeat was really interesting. I wonder if there's a sequel... no, that isn't it,

Ryouko. This is not the time to be grinning while reminiscing. This is a dream, a dream! You have to wake up and go get the game you reserved...)

Ryouko made a self-retort in her mind and slap her cheeks with her small hands. There was a *pechin~* sound, but only the feeling of squishy face remained on her palm.

Or rather than face, they were her cheeks. It seems soft for some reason.

(S-soft... These are without a doubt, squishy cheeks! They probably feel better than my niece's.)

Among Ryouko's family of five composed by her parents and three daughters, she was the eldest of the three sisters. The parents were not strict to the three women but they were fault-finders.

Among such sisters, the second daughter married earlier than Ryouko and gave birth to a daughter. That niece who was the first grandchild to Ryouko's parents was really adorable like an angel. Rather, because she was too cute, Ryouko's parents endlessly bought her everything. The hardships the three sisters experienced in order to stop them were now good memories.

That niece who was promoted to grade school this year had a precocious personality peculiar to girls, and was heading to a rebellious age. Her parents were troubled, but the child became emotionally attached to her aunt Ryouko for some reason and never opposed her.

It was also inconvenient that she throws a tantrum whenever they come over, saying she wanted to stay.

Specifically speaking, Ryouko wanted to hide everything that will lure her niece into the two-dimensional path, which is nothing but bad influence to her.

Her niece was cute but Ryouko didn't want anything that will lead her to the same road as herself, she had those sentiments of an aunt. However, if her niece wants to go ahead that road, Ryouko will back her up with all her strength.

"My my, what's wrong, Herscherik-sama?"

The brown-haired woman spoke with a smile. It was the woman whom Ryouko troubled a while ago. Apparently, Ryouko was named Herscherik and the woman doesn't seem like her mother.

“Aah...”

Ryouko intended to apologize but only a lovely voice came out of her mouth. Unfortunately, she still cannot speak.

“Have you already finished eating? Or can you still eat?”

The woman said so and placed a newly-prepared, steaming dish on the table. In addition, she scooped the porridge using a new spoon, blew it several times to let it cool and brought it to Ryouko’s mouth.

It was a simple dish of sweet potato and rice gruel simmered together. Ryouko felt like eating it very much and bit into the spoon. The rice gruel by itself is salty but the potato is sweet, it’s easy to eat and an exquisite taste spreads in her mouth.

“Is it delicious? It’s good, isn’t it?”

“Uuh~!”

Ryouko was thinking of answering the woman that it was delicious but what came out of her mouth were still baby talk instead of words.

However, the woman smiled as if satisfied, scooping the rice porridge once again and presenting it to Ryouko.

Ryouko was not aware of it herself but it seemed like she was famished. Ryouko ate the food presented to her without a pause.

(It’s like the young bird I kept a long time ago.)

The bird and herself carried a delicate atmosphere but had an unstoppable appetite. When she finished eating the contents of the plate, she even let out a shameful burp. The woman who heard that gently wiped Ryouko’s mouth with a napkin, then tenderly dropped her off from the baby chair onto the soft carpet. Then a stuffed animal that’s probably a dog was placed near Ryouko.

(It’s like Kuro from my parent’s home...)

It was a stuffed toy of a black dog the same size as herself. It reminded her of the large black dog being kept at her parents’ house.

When Ryouko tried to touch it, she immediately liked the silky fur that feels good to the touch. Rather, it was probably placed beside her because it was her favorite. She saw off the woman who placed the dishes on the cart and went out to put them away. Ryouko then surveyed the room.

This room was not her apartment. Even if all the rooms in her own home was added up, this area was still even more spacious. The room was European-style in the Middle Ages found in fantasy novels. Incidentally, she realized that the woman from before was wearing a dress that also came out of a novel.

The room had a calm, deep green wallpaper, a bed with an attached canopy and a soft, fluffy carpet. Even the quality of the furniture such as the sofa were good. Ryouko unconsciously thought of how many months of her salary they cost.

There was also a fireplace and a portrait of a beautiful blond woman displayed above it. The pose of that person was similar to the one displayed in the art room that often come out in the school's seven wonders.¹

(I wonder if the eyes move at night...?)

The muscles along her spine froze as soon as she thought that. Ryouko had always been weak at those kind of stories and hated them to death.

Ryouko turned to look at other places but she lost her balance and tumbled on her back. She didn't feel any pain at all thanks to the expensive-looking carpet, instead it was comfortable.

The warm sunlight from the window attached to the balcony induced drowsiness. *I want to nap~* Just as she arrive at that thought, Ryouko snapped out of it.

(This isn't the time to take a nap.)

Ryouko tossed about and got up. As is expected, suddenly sitting up was impossible with the body of the baby. Well, there was also the hardship of a 30-something's flabby stomach in the original body.

But even if she looked around, she couldn't discover anything new. Ryouko looked at her body again.

Small hands, short arms and legs, flabby stomach.

(I'm a baby no matter how you look at it, I'm truly thankful.)

Hmm, hmm, hmm, Ryouko was lost in thought.

(Before I came to this body, what was I doing?)

While recalling the memories of her original body, she crossed her arms that became short and creased her forehead.

(I worked overtime even though it was the game's release date, when I left the company, there was a heavy rain...)

Unexpected rain and the green light which began to flicker.

Loud car horn.

White light.

Sky and ground,

Dull sound.

Screams and angry roar.

...and then pitch black darkness.

Guessing from there, Ryouko understood the cruel reality and could do nothing but be convinced.

(Ah, that's right. I died.)

◇ ◇ ◇

Ryouko consented to the reality that she died in a traffic accident... she could not help but consent.

Ryouko remembered that it was a setting that happened quite often in the manga and novels she willingly read by herself, and even in games.

After a high school student or a university student died from a traffic accident or a disease in modern Japan, they reincarnate in a different world with the memories of their previous life, then save the world and conquer it – a royal road fantasy that's very popular.

(To think that someone in her 30's will actually have such a light novel setting...)c

Ryoko became exhausted and lied on the soft and fluffy carpet again. With this body of a baby that won't move as Ryouko intended, even sitting down was a heavy labor.

(...For the time being, the apartment's loan will be cleared since I died.)

Ryouko recalled her previous life while looking at the ceiling absent-mindedly. They say you don't know what will happen in life but Ryouko never thought she would be able to reflect on the things she left undone after dying.

(The game reservation is alright since it will be cancelled if you do not claim it on that day... Nay, I once worked overtime and wasn't able to go, and I received a refreshing call from my shopkeeper friend the next day saying "Yo-you're going to get it, right!?" She's probably worried by now. I feel guilty...)

The *onee-san* shopkeeper, whom Ryouko was acquainted with since high school days, was the only person Ryouko can reveal her *otaku* self, other than her family. She always welcomed Ryouko with a smile when she visits the shop that it made Ryouko inadvertently respond with a smile.

(That reminds me, the deadline at work is close, too. I was thinking of doing it tomorrow but I haven't uploaded the data. Did that newbie girl handle it? The department head will patch things up and there's also a manual so I want to think it will be alright... Aah, I'm glad I made a manual just in case.)

I told my junior "I might die or disappear anytime so I made a guide!" but the me at that time never imagined it would actually happen, Ryouko was overcome with deep emotion.

(Lastly, I wanted to erase my PC data before my sisters and parents discover them...)

As far as Ryouko was concerned, this was her only real regret. Data that cannot be shown to others were saved in the computer in her house. It was a Pandora's box full of her dark history such as R-rated stuff, literary creations and poems she wrote from a long time ago. *Frankly, if it's possible to revive, I want to delete everything.* That was Ryouko's real thoughts.

(Since I also threatened my sisters, "If I die, splash my PC with water until it's impossible to start it up anymore, okay? If you look what's inside, I'm going to haunt you at your bedside," it's fine... It will be fine, right? Seriously.)

If they saw it, I'm going to die! No, I'm already dead but I reincarnated so I won't be able to haunt them, Ryouko felt mortified.

(I can't watch the dramas I saved up for nine months either.)

She was busy with work but she wanted to watch dramas and anime no matter what so she recorded them. The capacity of her hard drive is always at its very limit. She intended to watch them in the weekend but always forgot. It was quite common that even though she recorded from the first to the last episode, she ended up deleting them without watching.

(Which reminds me, I was supposed to return to my parents' home this weekend. They always prepare a cake. I really wanted to eat it...)

They were probably worried about Ryouko being unmarried, but she was always invited to her parent's house during birthdays, Christmas and even if there were no events, they gave some reason once a month.

Ryouko recalled that even her lazy younger sisters who were poor at corresponding sent emails for some strange reason.

She recalled they rarely gathered after the little sisters married, but if everyone did gather, they bought slightly expensive ice cream...

Ryouko realized the moment she reflected that far. Nay, she thought of other things as much as possible and although she prevented thinking of those since she didn't want to realize, she still arrived there after all.

(I cannot meet my family, colleagues, friends and acquaintances anymore...)

The inside of her nose became painful, the corner of her eyes became hot. The sensation filling up her throat was a sob, and she was overwhelmed with emotions.

The last time she saw her family was a month ago.

Her stock of rice ran out so she went to her parent's home to eat dinner. *Tell us ahead*

if you're going to come, her mother scolded her while Ryouko drank beer with her father at dinner.

And she was seen off by her mother who told her to come back because they will prepare cake for her birthday in the weekend.

The night of the next day, her younger sisters sent emails saying, "We'll go to your birthday party! Look forward to your presents!"

There's no need to greet me at this age, she thought, but she was happy.

(I was really looking forward to the presents...)

There were slight changes but she expected that her ordinary life will continue.

She would probably get married in the future and if she wouldn't, she will continue to work while looking after her old parents. m

She would favor her little sister's children, work until retirement age and live off her savings, enter the retirement home before becoming senile and have her sisters prepare a funeral at her death.

She did not have any intentions to die earlier than her parents at all, but still, she was an awfully unfilial person.

(Sorry, I'm sorry... I'm sorry for being an unfilial, hopeless big sister...)

The baby's cry resounded in the room.



At the cries that suddenly resounded, the wet nurse Meria returned to the room in a hurry.

Usually, the boy was always in a good mood after a meal. He only cried at night, he was a cheerful boy in the whole day as long as he has the stuffed dog beside him. Although crying is a baby's job, Herscherik does not really do he work. In reality, he is a baby who doesn't need a lot of looking after. He was so independent to that extent that it's worrying.

He sleeps a lot, eats a lot and laughs a lot — a child who seemed like the mirror of a baby¹.

When Meria came rushing into the room, Herscherik was lying on the carpet on his

back, crying with a red face.

“Herscherik-*sama*, perhaps you’re hurt!?”

Meria held the baby in her arms and rubbed the back of his head to examine it. However, there was no lump and instead, the back of his head was in excellent shape.

When she leaned the baby against her to make him comfortable and rubbed his back, he let out a tiny voice as if to respond. Meria leaked out a sigh when Herscherik began to calm down.

“Were you frightened when you fell down, Herscherik-*sama*?”

Meria stood up with Herscherik still in her arms and repeatedly swayed Herscherik to soothe him.

“Look, look, your face has turned deep red.”

She took him along to look at the life-sized mirror. because Herscherik was naturally fair-skinned, his reddened cheeks stood out very much.

Meria stood in front of the mirror and Herscherik peered into the mirror. Right then, his cries suddenly stopped. He stopped so suddenly that it was unnatural so Meria also looked into the mirror. Herscherik’s perfectly round body hardened. And then, he pinched his reddened cheeks with his fingers.

“Herscherik-*sama*, it will hurt if you pinch your cheeks.”

Meria chided him gently and removed his small hand from his cheeks. Still, Herscherik’s eyes remained opened wide in perfect circles.

(...*Seriously?*)

Ryouko was so surprised that she thought her flowing tears drew back in, and was at loss for words.

Reflected in the mirror was precisely an angel.

Smooth, pale-colored blond hair and good-looking features, and attached to that face

are blue jade-like eyes. One would be convinced this person will absolutely become a pure, pale-skinned beautiful girl in the future.

A scholar in the television once said, *babies are born cute in order for everyone to love them*, but this exceeded that range.

Ryouko was by no means a narcissist.

Actually she was aware that her appearance in her previous life was just good enough to be considered in the lower-middle side. If she had to say, she disliked her looks. When she was praised, “What the hell are you scheming?” that was what she thought. However, she was a disappointing human whose face turned bright red and writhed in agony when capture targets from *otome* games whispered to her.

(Is this the world of an otome game!?)

Ryouko made a guts pose in her mind.

She certainly felt sorry for her parents, not being able to meet her little sisters was also sad. Ryouko, who was ran over when she crossed the street during a blinking green light, sympathized with the driver who has shouldered the crime of accidental homicide.

If there is a pedestrian crossing during a driver’s left turn, they should stop, so it’s also their fault for not doing their obligation to check whether there’s a pedestrian or not.

Fortunately, although she died, she can literally start a second life while having the memories of her previous life.

(And furthermore, with the appearance of such a beautiful girl!)

It doesn’t particularly mean she disliked her previous appearance. Because her mother gave birth to her through hardships and her father worked with utmost effort and nurtured her.

However, like the heroine of a manga and the protagonist of an *otome* game, everyone longed for a lovely appearance at least once. Even men yearned to be in the position of the protagonist and the leading man² in games and manga. Probably.

(Viva, blonde hair blue eyes! Thank you, God. Thank you very much.)

Ryouko sincerely expressed her gratitude to the God she did not believe in her previous life.

“Shall I change the diaper soon?”

The wet nurse laid the baby on the bed and started to change the diapers with practiced hands.

(Saying it's inevitable is indeed embarrassing... wha—-?!)

Ryouko turned her head for a fleeting glance and saw the lower part of her body. Thereupon exists something that was not there in her previous life.

The only memory Ryouko had of seeing “it” upfront was during the time she took a bath with her father before she entered elementary school.

Right, the thing that females usually do not have, is between Ryouko's legs.

“Waaaaaaaaah~~~!!”

The crying of a baby echoed through the room again.

In this way, Hayakawa Ryouko reincarnated into a prince whose looks can be mistaken as that of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beautiful girl — the Seventh Prince Herscherik of the Greysis Kingdom.

Footnotes:

1. The word Meria used to refer to Herscherik is 赤子(*akago*), which may mean just ‘baby’ but it can also be read as ‘imperial child’.
2. **Leading man** -> 二枚目 (*nimaime*) means ‘handsome man (from Kabuki plays)’. Kabuki has a ranking system for characters and 二枚目 is one of them. The word can also mean ‘the actor in a love scene’.

Chapter 2

Prince, Royal Family, and Birthday

Isecai's Important Notes:

Alterations so far:

- Greysis kingdom —> **Greisis** kingdom. Somehow the katakana reminds me of “crisis”, which is why I modify it to be more similar.
 - ソルイエ (Herscherik's dad) —> **Soleil**. It sounds more like “Soluier” though, so if any of you wants to suggest something better, I'm game.
 - I'll keep Japanese suffixes in direct sentences. For those unfamiliar:
 - **Otou-sama** = Esteemed Father
 - While talking about his past life, I'm using female pronouns.
-

The morning for Herscherik, the seventh prince of Greisis kingdom, is slow. Only when the consorts who live in the inner palace have finished their breakfast would the person in charge for their tableware come and take him out of the bed.

...I want to go back to sleep.

Ryouko—no, Herscherik—who, frankly, only wants to sleep until noon, thinks so as he absentmindedly stares with sleepy eyes. He kept a record of sleeping for 17 hours straight in the previous world, a proud record that he couldn't exactly boast around.

He's weak in the mornings. In the previous world, she had to set up three alarms clocks, *plus* the alarm function in her phone, so that she could make the time to get out of the bed. Barely.

“Strange. Somehow, the alarm has gotten under the *futon*.”

In the past life, she would have tilted her head. Once she found all of her alarms or her smartphone, she would excavate then dispose them. Obviously, it annulled the original purpose of having alarms in the first place. When she began living on her own, she was barely on time, all the time.

I need to change my clothes...

Herscherik took his time to remove his clothes, then stretching himself in that spot while stifling his yawn. The sun was already high up, as the carpet was bathed under the gentle spring sunlight that peeked from the gaps of the curtain which covered the window.

The day he remembered his past life, the so-called awakening of his ego, was when he was slightly older than two years old. Not being bothered by the long sleeping hours nor spending his time leisurely, for Herscherik, the time when he was a baby was supremely blissful. If he was sleepy, he could sleep in under his futon until noon. Whenever he was bored, Melia—the first feminine name he heard and later found out to be his nanny, but anyway, that Melia brought him to walks, or read some picture books to him. When he thought he was hungry, the food would soon be prepared. He was fully enjoying his convenient baby life.

But that only lasted when he was a baby. Now that he could stand on his feet and arrange his time, Ryouko felt that it was too embarrassing and pathetic to leave everything to his nursing mother.

It feels very vaguely like a manga, having the appearance of a child, but the brain of an adult..... or in this case, an auntie, huh?

When he couldn't move my body as he wanted to, he acted like a baby. From changing clothes to being fed, from bathing to the issue down there, Melia courageously did those for him, but after he gradually got used to his body, he refused to accept any help to do anything from A to Z. Being troubled over conveying that resulted in Herscherik's decision to behave like a proper toddler and say, "But I can do it alone."

Whenever Melia is about to do something, Herscherik will refuse and throw a tantrum by saying, "Dun wannaaaa! I can do it alooone!" When it's the time to change clothes, he'll snatch the clothes away. When it's meal time, he'll demand for the spoon. He only wants to go to the toilet alone too. Even in bath, he'll refuse any help and do everything by himself.

Melia showed a confused expression at first, but Herscherik slowly has been able to change the clothes on his own, eat by himself, finish the toilet business on his own too. So Melia has been less anxious and doesn't help more than necessary.

That doesn't mean she neglected her duties. As soon as she could deal with something,

she had always been prepared to do that. The dangerous tools for children like knife or scissors couldn't be found around Herscherik's arm's reach, she didn't bring them around either. Then, she praised Herscherik when he overcame his task, as if he was her own son.

Well, I also tricked her..... which was pretty embarrassing.

Herscherik starts to recall.

Because it would look unnatural to be able to do things from the start, he intentionally made mistakes in buttoning up his shirt or mistaking the right and left shoes. In order not to be suspicious. He dropped the spoon not-so-accidentally, or toppled his cup. Melia let out a tiny sigh while cleaning them up. While inwardly apologizing, Herscherik gradually showed her that he could do those things. Thanks to that, now Melia doesn't worry anymore, and she comes to this room mainly to prepare Herscherik's meals.

Herscherik gives an excuse that he oversleeps sometimes, just for his amusement.

Herscherik jumps out of the bed, landing on the soft carpet. He can't balance his body, so he quickly reaches out his hand, but he ends up falling to his face. He has shown a shameful behavior. At first, his struggles to walk on his two feet was also unhindered since there was no difference to the walking pace she had in the previous life.

While stifling his yawn for the second time, Herscherik first turns to the washroom's direction. He steps onto the stool prepared for him to use, twisting the tap to pour the water into the bucket, filling it to wash his face. Incidentally, the daily devices in this world only has little disparity to modern Japan. If the faucet is twisted, water will come out, the toilet is also water-flushed. There's shower too, and the bath tub is also filled with heated water. He did wonder if this too convenient world was just his dream, but in his sleep and wake, the world didn't change.

Herscherik finishes washing his face and walks with his feet into the dressing room.

The first time I saw that, I was really surprised.....

Beside the bedroom, there's a small room installed, about 10-tatami size. Walking into the room, a sight of expensive-looking outfits greets him from left and right. Not only clothes, even shoes and accessories are all prepared, all order-made without

exception. While being overwhelmed by the dazzling garments, Herscherik takes out a suitable outfit among them.

Let's wear the deep blue outfit today.

Herscherik takes his time to undress his pajamas. He could do that already, but with his three year old body, his movement is still slow. He puts his arms into the blouse, pulling his trousers up to the thigh, putting on the jacket. He knows they use fine quality fabric from the way they slide wonderfully on his skin. The decorations are the workmanship of a first-rate artist, those glittering gold buttons.

Finishing changing his clothes, he combs his silky blond hair to fix his bed hair. Before reincarnated, she had frizzy hair, so she had to fight every morning to fix the bed hair. However, this blond hair becomes straight just by combing once, so he feels grateful. The very last one is to twirl in front of the full body mirror, looking at the reflection of a pretty girl—no, pretty boy and his blond-hair, blue-eyes combination. Herscherik nods in satisfaction.

The difference from my previous life is like heaven and earth.

Herscherik reminisces on his previous life. Even though he was a woman, *she* had absolutely no interest in clothes or jewelries. She was given uniform from her workplace, and at home, jersey was enough. When she went out, jeans and T-shirts, or trainer suit. Only when going out with her friends or family members would she smartly dress up in high spirit. As a member of society, she was cautious for her attire while commuting to work, but that couldn't be said to be fashionable.

Compared to his previous life, he has become more conscious of his body. Herscherik admires himself. It's just thinking that his body is still growing, so all those order made clothes are wasteful, but not wearing the clothes he already has would be inexcusable.

"Morning, Hersche. Where are you?"

Upon the voice of a young man calling him, Herscherik showed his face from the closet room. Melia and the young owner of that voice were already there with the breakfast that was previously brought in.

"You changed your clothes on your own? You did great, Hersche."

The young man smiles. That smile was so dazzling that Herscherik unconsciously squinted his eyes.

Platinum blond color akin to a gathering of moonlight, blue eyes as lustrous as Herscherik's. The deep outer corner of his eyes slanted down, but it made him possess a gentle bearing. He had the look of a *bishounen* in his late twenties, right there. Yet, Herscherik knew better. Even though he looked like this, he was already in his thirties.

He's roughly the same age as me in my past life, that's so unfair.....

Herscherik smiles while thinking of it, and gives his morning greetings.

"Good morning, Otou-sama."

Herscherik recalled his shock when he realized that the beautiful youth was his own father.

His reincarnated self was indeed revised, a compensation for reverting to a baby, but the youth was so beautiful that he mistook him as a young woman. However, the male half of his parents possessed the same platinum color up there, undoubtedly where he got it from. Herscherik misunderstood again when they met afterwards, guessing that he was his older brother instead of his father due to that youthful looks. He was surprised that they were really far apart as siblings, and since his visiting time didn't have any fixed schedule, Herscherik was worried about whether he was working properly or not.

The son is endlessly worrying, yet absolutely won't show that in his face. The father, holding his beloved son up in his arms with a smile that is so dazzling that any woman will KO-ed in one hit, ruffles the fluffy blond hair that Herscherik has just finished styling.

Herscherik, who can't get used to have his hair ruffled no matter what, squirmed ticklishly and showed a shy expression. He appears as 3 years old toddler, but mentally, Herscherik is a sloppy 30 years old woman who had long abandoned love. This kind of response was already the best effort he could muster.

"It is the time for your meeting soon, Your Majesty." A low voice interrupts the father-son private time. The notification came from a man in his prime age. Black eyes combined with darker hair than deep green belonging to the prime adult man with

composed air, his name is Rook. He's Herscherik's father's butler.

There are many people who will associate a butler in fantasy world to nobility. Even Herscherik used to think like that, actually. Moreover, Herscherik has predicted that he was reincarnated in a family that was doing pretty well, from the moment he noticed he had a nanny.

However, the reality was more exaggerated.

The living standard was high, so I thought I was reincarnated as a son of an above average noble house, but..... Who would've thought I'm an actual prince?

When the revelation came to him, Herscherik's emotions were really chaotic. She wished to be a princess or a lady, as a child. Now that he has truly become a prince, he wondered how he could wish for something like that back then.

It's true that you have to be careful of what you wish for.....

Herscherik is still a child, but somehow he feels like he has lost something precious.

Having told by his own butler, Herscherik's father—the 23rd king of Greisis kingdom, Soleil—regretfully puts his son on the ground and pats Herscherik's head.

“Then, I'll be going.”

“Yes, I wish you can do your best for your duties today as well, Otou-sama.”

Soleil smiles from Herscherik's words and rubs his son's head once again, then exits the room, taking his butler with him.

After sending off his father, the king, Herscherik sits on the chair, waiting for the meal prepared by Melia while looking at the painting above the fireplace. Directly facing his dining chair, the painting portrays a blonde similar to Mona Lisa. Melia only recently told him that it was the portrait of his mother.

Herscherik's mother, as told by Melia, died after her condition worsened from giving birth to him. According to Melia, his mother was the most favored concubine out of all the consorts and concubines in the palace, but since she came from a lowly merchant origin, she couldn't become the queen consort. She didn't aim for the status either, she only wished to be by the king's side.

Since Melia told the story about how the two met very excitedly, Herscherik couldn't figure out which part was true or exaggerated. However, anyone who enjoys shoujo manga would blush so hard, hearing the development to the part where his father went out to the castle town in a disguise and met his mother there, and commented "If that's true, it won't be weird if their son strays off the right path because he feels too embarrassed, you know?" when someone proposed a marriage at last.

Which was his mother, not his father.

At that point, their ages differed by more than twelve years, but his mother didn't seem to mind that when she proposed. Anyhow, his father looked young, but he was actually in his 30s, while his mother was 18 when they got married. And so, Herscherik endlessly worried further if his father was a lolicon.

Because Melia accompanied Herscherik's mother, she talked a lot about the past in nostalgia. His mother, compared to other consorts and concubines, was less attractive in looks. That being said, the consorts all possessed extraordinary beauty, so if she was compared to an ordinary woman, his mother seemed to be beautiful enough.

His mother had a really bright personality. Melia never saw her looking depressed, not even once. She was always cheerful, and even though she was a favored concubine, she loved doing housework. She often started cleaning up on her own, which made the people around her feel troubled. She sneaked into the kitchen to bake cakes and cookies, then presenting them in a tea party with other consorts. She greeted the tired king who retired to his room with a special effect make up of a ghost. She was an eccentric favorite concubine.

Herscherik was born to that concubine and the king, but the concubine lost her life, and the king lost the woman he loved most. His father treated his mother favorable among his other consorts, he even uses up all his break time to visit Herscherik, it's really heartbreaking. But it's not accurate to say that his father neglected his other consorts, concubines, or even his other children because of that.

Herscherik is the youngest prince, he doesn't have any younger siblings. His older brothers and sisters are seven or more years apart from him, each one of them are attending so-called schools and academies, and usually are not around.

The king's other consorts are also good-natured, there's no jealousy or plotting that

abundantly happens in the so-called palace harem novels. They'd rather do some girl talks, like how to cheer up the king who always seems to be exhausted lately or chatting in the garden while having a tea party, as witnessed by Herscherik while he goes on a walk with Melia. He sometimes takes that opportunity to get adoring touches and some sweets. For the time being, Herscherik hopes that the current favorite concubine's candidate will stop copying ghost make ups that his mother did. He can easily imagine the king faints instead of feeling cheered up.

"Herscherik-sama, it's the long awaited night, isn't it?" Melia joyfully said as she served Herscherik's late breakfast.

"What kind of clothes shall we pick for you? How about the rouge-colored outfit that you've just gotten from the tailor? Ah, but Herscherik-sama's hair also fits a fresh green color, doesn't it?"

Herscherik tilts his head while looking at Melia and her sparkling eyes.

"Is something going to happen?"

"Oh, my." Melia's eyes widened as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Tonight is Herscherik-sama's birthday feast. It's Herscherik-sama's debut party."

Melia's words made Herscherik tilt his head for the second time.



It was a large banquet hall connected by a balcony to the garden and maintained for the royal family's exclusive use.

The musical performance of top-ranking musicians from all over the country echoed in this place. The dance floor in the center of the hall was prepared beforehand and several groups of women and men danced to the music. The vibrant dresses of the ladies flared out like flower petals, almost like the fairies who announce the coming of spring.

The venue was a buffet but food was being prepared. On top of the table, a pure white cloth was spread and crowds of dishes that were made by the chefs who cook exclusively for royalty were lined up. The servers placed on trays the glasses of the highest grade alcohol that was prepared to be used for this special day and the waitresses came in and out like a wave.

(Is this like the 7-5-3 ¹ of this world? Aah, I wanna eat that food...)

While catching glimpses of the invitees enjoying the food from the corner of his eye, the star of the day, Herscherik, let out a sigh from his heart.

Herscherik sat in the seat of honor besides his father the king in the banquet hall. He dealt with the waves of guests by giving the business smile he learned in his past life, without showing any emotion.

It may be a custom of this country, but it seems that the sons and daughters of royalty and aristocrats are introduced to high society at the age of 3. Especially since royal children spend their time inside the palace, not appearing before people. They hardly have any contact with other aristocrats. He may have been visited by his maternal relatives, if they existed, but they aren't royalty. There was only his old grandfather who was a commoner. That grandfather had apparently disowned Herscherik's mother when she married, so the amount of people Herscherik met since birth was small, with his father and Meria being the main ones. That's why this celebratory banquet in honor of his 3rd birthday was the first time he has met this many people.

By the way, 16 years old is the true debut to high society and 18 years old is when one becomes an adult and can drink alcohol.

The reason why he knew this is that when his older brother, the first prince who turned 16 this year, arrived first to give his greetings together with the princess consort, his father happily informed him. The father gave a strained laugh as he warned him to not get too crazy.

However, what caught Herscherik's attention over his father's words was the unbelievable army of beautiful men, women, boys, and girls that was the princess consorts and his siblings.

(The genes for beauty are amazing.....)

One by one, members of the royal family came to give their greetings here and there, and there was a great variety in their beautiful forms.

All the princess consorts were first-rate beauties and their slender bodies begged the question if they really gave birth. Of course as they have a seat in the banquet, there was no way they were going to lose in terms of their clothes. From their make-up to their hairstyle, even their dresses were done with the finest quality.

It wasn't just the princess consorts though. His princess siblings were so beautiful that

it would make anyone turn around to look back at them. The comparison “Like a flower” probably exists for their sake.

And starting from the first prince, all the princes were all beauties with good looks that wouldn’t lose to the princesses. Herscherik whose vocabulary was limited, was so thankful that a word like “ikemen ²” exists.

For example, the eldest brother, the first prince, had magnificent red hair.

His red hair looked like it was on fire and his intense eyes were of the same color. His princess consort who was a mother was very charming, but her son inherited her charm and his one gesture was very refined. It’s probably been drilled in him before, but his clothing tightly fit his body and his elegance spurred it on. When he finished greeting the guest of honor Herscherik and the king, he was surrounded by many aristocrats’ daughters in a blink of an eye, but the figure of him accompanying them without giving a single unpleasant face truly resembled that of a young noble.

Next is the second prince, who if one had to say, resembled his father.

His long platinum blonde hair was loosely tied in a braid behind him. His eyes are filled with a blue like the depths of the ocean and looked somewhat fragile, but they give off a different charm than the first prince’s. They looked like they’ll shatter if one touches them, but it’s different to a woman. He is the owner of a beautiful face that hides his flexible strength.

There was such a wide range of differences among the 6 older prince brothers, yet no one couldn’t say that they weren’t all beautiful men. Everyone stated their congratulation speeches but Herscherik didn’t have time to give thanks.

(What otome game ³ is this? There are only beautiful men everywhere I look)

Herscherik retorted inside his mind. The first time he met his brothers, he felt like he was going to be sick and tired of beautiful people.

(It’s fine that there’s at least one disappointing child! Rather, there must be!... It is I)

Herscherik was going back and forth with the joke inside his head as he felt depressed.

On such a day, Meria was enthusiastic and dressed Herscherik very magnificently.

On his dark green tuxedo of fine embroidery, the buttons engraved with designs and the cuffs shined. A fresh, green, silk ribbon was stylishly tied around his neck. Meria and his father gave high praises and he was conceited thinking that he looked cool himself. But with each beautiful brother who came to give their greetings, his cheap

conceit continued to be crushed and had become dust.

How do I put it? Like I'm missing a flower or a princely aura. Herscherik thought as he looking at his brothers. Even though he is the typical prince with blond hair and blue eyes, compared to the other princes, he's lacking in gaudiness.

If one thinks of comparisons, what comes to mind for the eldest brother is a rose, while the next eldest is a lily. For Herscherik, the faint image of a baby's breath comes.

(Though it's not a human's face.....)

Only in his interior, Herscherik felt like that his perspective of an otaku woman past her prime has ended ⁴.

(Besides, even if I'm complimented by a beauty, I wouldn't really be happy and would only hear words of disgust.....)

All brothers he met for the first time welcomed him. Of course, they praised his manners and clothes. But what he was frankly unhappy about was a personal problem of Herscherik who has become a little sentimental.

For example, the feeling when you compliment the cutest girl in the class and she responds with "Oh no~ You're cute too, you know!"

Of course, this is his paranoia. By the way, in the example, Herscherik is the one who gets a little annoyed at the classmate complimenting the cute girl, rather than at the girl.

While his conceit was being crushed and weathered away, the wave coming towards him changed from royalty to nobles. The first of the nobles to see him was the minister, Marquess Barbasse.

"It's an honor to meet you for the first time, Your Highness Herscherik."

(Aah, since I've been seeing beautiful people till now, this ordinary face calms me down...)

Herscherik thought that if he said those feelings out loud, it would be rude.

Marquess Barbasse was a man succeeding in the prime of his life, with calm hazel-color eyes and hair as well as a fine moustache that brings out the feeling that he is

indeed a noble.

However, the glint in his eyes was sharp as if he was evaluating him and caused Herscherik's previous feelings to take a complete change.

Rethinking it, Herscherik's gaze, in regards to his previous life, was terribly sensitive, whether it be friendly or unfriendly.

Speaking of that, she sensed whenever her boss in her previous life's workplace would call her, and it's a special skill that she considers herself. In addition, her intuition seemed sharp. She could catch phone at the **Br** moment in the phone's **Bring bring bring**. It was a special skill that surpassed the level of surprise for her junior.

"It's an honor to meet you, Minister. Thank you for taking your time out to come here."

Herscherik, who cultivated his previous experience, gave an admirable response that would be unbelievable for a 3 year-old. After saying that, he noticed that it was unnatural, but it's too late.

In his previous life, Ryoko's mother would point out that she does that.

"You're the type to deal with people you don't like by being as polite as your level of hatred."

It was a disposition that her parents also shared: a mother who would snicker as she says, "When you are treated extremely politely by a hateful guy, doesn't it make you irritated for no reason?" and that mother was indeed Ryoko's mother.

In order to deceive the sharp gaze that became the Minister's gaze, Herscherik flashed a forced smile. *If you fail, dodge with a smile.* This is also one of the secrets of success in life. Incidentally, as this technique has people it works on and people it doesn't, it's necessary to read the mood.

Marquess Barbasse gave a smile that made his previous gaze look like a lie, to Herscherik.

"This is an extremely clever child, it seems. Your Majesty, I look forward to his future."
".....I see. This child is my treasure, so I look forward to how he'll group up from here on out."

Herscherik's father replied to Marquess Barbasse's words with a smile.

However, Herscherik didn't overlook the single moment when his father's hand and expression stiffened. In addition, he sensed a great sense of discomfort from the exchange between the two of them, but after that moment, the two conversed as if nothing had happened, causing Herscherik to close his mouth, without being able to say anything.

When the greetings from the aristocrats neared the end, a man with a look that he worried too much, stood before the guests of honor. Herscherik noticed because he sensed his strong gaze.

He was probably around his late 30s. He was a man with light yellow hair swept back and he was riding on the tired tailcoats of the prime of his life. He had an intense face, but compared to the other nobles, it was quite thin. No, rather than calling it thinned, it would be more correct to say worn out. No one called out about his appearance nor his brooding ambiance, and the people around him kept a fixed distance from him.

And then, he clenched his fist as he made a decision and advanced forward.

"Your Majesty, I have something I wish to convey to you."

Without any greeting, he began to speak, making Herscherik's shoulders tremble in surprise. As if to protect his son, the father took a step forward, hid him behind his back, and confronted the man.

"What for?"

Soleil, with the face befitting of a king, asked the man in a voice that is different from the kind voice he uses toward Herscherik. From behind his father, Herscherik peeked out to look around at his father and the man, as well as the surrounding people. The previous spectacular atmosphere of the area vanished. The music stopped and no one opened their mouth. A heavy air of tension dominated the area.

"Your Majesty, we grow closer to the citizen's breaking point year after year. The forceful collection of taxes whose rate increases each year. The injustice and oppression of the aristocrats and government officials increases every day. I beg of you, Your Majesty, please shift your attention towards the city!"

The man's voice echoed in the silent banquet hall.

"At this rate, our Greisis Kingdom that has surpassed 500 years since its founding, is

on the path towards complete ruination!”

“You’re being rude in the presence of His Majesty! Restrain yourself, Count Luzeria!”

The one who stopped him was Marquess Barbasse. However, the thinned man—Count Luzeria opened his eyes widely all of a sudden and glared at the minister.

“**You** are the one who must restrain yourself, Marquess Barbasse! As an aristocrat and a marquis, you’re the beast who will devour the country!”

“.....What?”

“You do corrupt acts, fill your own pockets because of your position, and moreover, I know you are communicating with other countries!”

Count Luzeria took out a single document and presented it to the king.

“Your Majesty, this is one of the pieces of evidences that I have gathered on his corruption. I beg of you, please accept this.”

Herscherik’s father timidly accepted it and his eyes followed the lines on the paper. Right after looking at it, the king understood and let out a gasp.

“This is.....”

He didn’t need to say the contents out loud, as there was no doubt that it contained the shocking truth. The king’s faintly trembling voice was proof.

The banquet hall fell silent, but it was the accused Marquess Barbasse who broke up the silence.

“Your Majesty, that is a fraud.”

It was an awfully calm voice. It surpassed calm with leeway. When Herscherik turned his line of sight, there was Marquess Barbasse staring at Count Luzaria with a serious face.

“In the past, there were rumors of me having communicated with foreign countries. As I had no such memory of doing so, I investigated it on my own. And as soon as I did, someone had falsified my name and communicated with our terrible enemy nation..... And it was you, Count Luzeria. ”

It was at that moment that Herscherik saw it. Minister Barbasse whose face was

serious until then, raised the corners of his detestable mouth in a triumphant expression for just one second. In contrast, Count Luzeria's expression was slowly stained in the color of despair after thinking for a couple of seconds.

When Marquess Barbasse gave a signal, a man appeared out of nowhere and presented a sealed letter to the king. There were no signs of it being opened on the sealed wax on the letter.

"My subordinate captured a spy who left Count Luzeria's mansion and right before he entered the foreign nation. This is what he was holding."

"...Count Luzeria, does this letter belong to you?"

Luzeria answered the king's question with silence.

There was the imperial seal on the sealing wax. Because the sealing wax would be cracked once it had been opened, this unopened letter was undeniable proof.

The king took the letter and opened the seal as Count Luzeria wouldn't say a single word. He read the letter and let out a deep sigh.

"This is a petition for seeking asylum to the foreign country. 'In return for offering information about my country, I request for position and rewards'...At the bottom, there is Count Luzeria's name and the same imperial seal."

In Herscherik's father's voice, there was hints of despair.

"...Was the first move, taken?"

That voice belonged to Count Luzeria. No one heard it as it was a small voice who only the nearby king and Herscherik could hear.

"Arrest the traitor!"

Marquess Barbasse's triumphant proclamation echoed.

Knights entered the banquet hall in a hurry and pinned down Count Luzeria, pushing down his head.

When the hall became noisy, something shiny ran by. The light ran over the polished marble on top and it stopped around Herscherik's feet.

There, a beautiful, old silver pocket watch fell down.

When Herscherik picked it up, it was so big that it filled the entire palm of the three year-old.

When he returned his gaze from the pocket watch back to the banquet hall, Count Luzeria was already tied up in a rope and leaving the hall behind.

“...I’m sorry for ruining your long-awaited party, Hersche.”

Herscherik heard his father’s voice above his head and then he was held up in his arms. When the two of their eyes met, his father’s face was very tired and it looks like he would cry at any time.

“Shall we end it here tonight?”

That was the ending signal for the banquet and the king exited, bringing along his beloved son. The king’s butler was the only one who followed after them and no one obstructed their way.

(Something is weird.....?)

Herscherik stared at the pocket watch as he was being taken away like that. Since coming to this world, it was the first time he sensed discomfort and unease in his life living as royalty.

Taking a complete change from the common folk, the lives of upper class of royalty was full of surprises. However, he understood in the end and it was an uncomfortable feeling he had gotten used to. The level of uneasiness was like that of changing his staple food of rice to bread.

But this unease was a completely different type than that.

The sound of the second hand that could be heard from the pocket watch seemed to stir up Herscherik’s unease with it’s agreement and disagreement ⁵.

-
1. A Japanese celebration for children when they're aged 3, 5, and 7 to celebrate their growth and wish for health
 2. A handsome man
 3. A game targeted towards women where the main character is a female and the rest of the cast is beautiful males
 4. Wasn't really sure what was happening, but I think it's Ryoko reflecting how this is just a reincarnation
 5. Like the ticking of the clock saying 'Yes' and 'No' with each tick

Chapter 3

Pocket watch, Count, and Puppet

“Muuu.....”

Herscherik let out a muffled voice as he rolled over inside his first-class futon. At the end of the terrible banquet, Herscherik returned to his room with his father. Meria, who felt more regret than he did, comforted him as she bathed him. Then he changed his clothes to pajamas and crawled into his bed. Normally it would only take him 3 minutes before he drifted off into dreamland, but today, he was unable to sleep and it felt like the journey to dreamland was far.

When Herscherik turned over again, the beautiful, old, silver pocket watch left on the side table came into view.

It was the object that came tumbling towards his feet by chance when the abused traitor, Count Luzeria, was arrested. At that moment, his line of sight was attracted to it like a magnet and before he knew it, it was in his hands. Now, the beautiful, old, silver pocket watch was giving off a dull shine from the moonlight that entered through the gap in the curtains.

Rather than saying that no one is to be blamed, the surrounding people were nothing like that and because of them being in a fluster, he carried the thing unnoticed when his father brought him to his own room.

Herscherik crawled out from his futon and picked up the pocket watch.

It was one of those types with a button to open and close it, and when you press it, the lid opens up to reveal the clock face. He had already sort of sensed it with his body, but it appears that a day in this world was also 24 hours and just like in the previous world, there were 12 numbers lined up in the same way. He understood by looking at the position of the needle that it was a little past 10 o'clock at night.

(...Why did Father have such a sad face when he was told that Count Luzeria was a traitor?)

The memory of his father's sad expression was burned in the inside of his mind. As a king, the scene should have been one of exposed anger at his retainer who betrayed

him. His father was kind, so he might have felt sadness, but if Herscherik had to say, then his expression was more befitting to be called disappointment.

(Besides, the count didn't look like a bad person.....)

To Herscherik, Count Luzeria seemed to be sincerely troubled at the country. At the same time, it also felt like he was being cornered.

(Something is wrong.)

That unease he felt at that place disturbed Herscherik's sleep.

It called forth insecurity in Herscherik's heart and stirred up impatience. He desperately tried to uncover the truth of this unease, reaching deep inside his mind to recall that incident.

The documents Count Luzeria pulled out

His father's expression of shock

The secret message Marquess Barbasse pulled out

Marquess Barbasse who was filled with confidence compared to Count Luzeria who had a hopeless expression

He tried to recall the details that he didn't notice at that time and repeatedly reproduced the scene in his head.

(...Ah!)

The moment he noticed after several recollections, the impatience inside of Herscherik vanished. He unconsciously relaxed his hand and the pocket watch fell, but he couldn't be bothered to notice.

(The marquess' proof and the count's actions aren't consistent!)

The evidence that the Marquess had could certainly be definitive proof. However, a person sending a secret message to a foreign country to seek asylum wouldn't report to the king as if to rub his nose in the face of danger.

If he was Herscherik, he would have escaped right away. That way, rather than rubbing his sins in the face, he would have a higher chance of easily escaping. No thief would

purposely turn themselves into the police while holding onto evidence.

When he reconsidered the minister's actions as well, they were also strange. How could he determine the count's document to be a counterfeit without checking it and knowing its contents?

(...Perhaps he knew something beforehand about the document handed over?)

When he noticed this one inconsistency, other parts here and there became questionable.

Additionally, Herscherik couldn't forget Minister Barbasse's last expression. That expression that completely looked down on people, just like the evil magistrate in historical dramas, made Herscherik's chest rise with discomfort.

'..... Was the first move, taken?'

The last words whispered by Count Luzeria wouldn't leave his head.

He picked up the pocket watch that had fallen off the bed. Whether it was from the recoil of the drop, the lip of the clock was open and when he looked at it, Herscherik's eyes grew wide. What was there wasn't the clock face that he had seen before, but a small portrait fitted inside. It appears that this pocket watch had a two-fold structure. A structure where if you lightly press the open-and-close button, it will be the clock face; and if you open it after you pressed the button twice to close it, the portrait will appear.

The portrait had a young and healthy Count Luzeria, a woman who is probably Luzeria's wife, and a baby held in her arms. The three of them as a family were smiling happily.

'The count will probably get the death penalty..... '

He recalled the aristocrats' conversation on his way back to his own room.

'Is he in jail right now? It would've been nice if he had been obedient.'

Herscherik closed the pocket watch and returned it to the table. He then went to bed and pulled the futon over himself.

(I probably can't meet him right now.)

He easily came to the prediction that an investigation was surely underway right around now.

(Tomorrow, I'm gonna wake up early and go meet him.)

The reason being is that he felt like he must meet him.

Herscherik wasn't sleepy but he still closed his eyes.

It was a quick two years since he reincarnated to this world. Herscherik has come to live the life of royalty, something unthinkable in his past life.

He is fed without saying anything. All his clothes are custom made with the highest grade. Even though he lost his mother, his wet nurse Meria was kind to him. His father is the king as well as a kind, handsome young man.

Compared to his life before he reincarnated, this world is an unthinkable dream-like world without inconveniences. Almost like he had hit jackpot in a lottery.

However, this world surrounding him may not be that sweet of a dream after all. Thinking back, there were many unnatural occurrences. But he had turned a blind eye to them. He felt like if he did look at them straight in the eye, then he would have given up and forgotten everything about his past life.

And he may no longer want to admit the reality of Ryoko's death and her family whom she will never see again, and drown in the indulgent life as an aristocrat in this world.

The righteous heart that tells him that he mustn't forget and the fearful heart that wants him to look away from reality clashed inside of Herscherik.

At 4 AM, Herscherik got up from his bed in the middle of his still dim room and finished changing clothes as quickly as he could. It was still the beginning of spring and cold, so he put on a coat. After he opened the door and poked his head out the door, he checked that no one was outside and ran out to the hallway.

(I'm glad that I got Meria to show me a sketch of the castle.)

He always did his normal walks with Meria. Although he wasn't allowed to leave the inner palace nor garden for any reason, Meria thoroughly taught him which paths to

take to get where.

Roughly speaking the castle is composed of: the king's residence as the inner palace to the north, the imperial castle that acts as the governmental facility to the south, the research institutions to the east, and military facility for the soldiers and knights to the west. Specifically speaking, the little details are different, but to Herscherik who doesn't go out, as long as he knew the path to his destination, the western castle with the prison, it was enough.

He left the empty hallway and entered the courtyard. This courtyard was a place where only those living in the inner palace can enter. In the daytime, the princess consorts gazed at the flowers and their chatter caused the flowers to bloom. But in this time of no daylight, there wasn't a single person here. He left the passageway that was next to that garden. He passed through the gate that faced the imperial castle and turned towards the west. He headed west in that direction and saw his destination come into view.

Herscherik barely managed to reach his destination while avoiding the eyes of the soldiers on night shift patrol.

When he left the passageway that connected the imperial castle to the military facility, the training grounds were right in front of him. During the daytime, the place would have been filled with soldiers and knights. However, the military facilities stood towering among the surrounding empty training grounds.

This is the first time he has been outside of the inner palace. Normally, Herscherik would frolic around, but he didn't have the luxury to do so now.

(The prison is further west.....)

He recalled the sketch from inside of his memory and began walking. He went past the soldiers in the middle of their patrol several times and reached the backside of the military facility.

Probably due to the lack of maintenance, the surrounding garden between the castle walls and the facility was overgrown with weeds, and the grass was free to grow as tall as it could. It was lucky for him that a child's body could easily be hidden just by bending down.

On the wall of the building, there was a window that was close to the floor and had

bars covering it. There was no glass inserted in the space and only the bars were attached to it. The small windows that may have been made to prevent escaping, acted as a substitute light source for the prisoners below in the basement.

(I hope he's in here...)

He gripped the beautiful, old, silver pocket watch as a good luck charm and approached the bars.

"Count Luzeria, are you there?"

He called out in a small voice so he wouldn't be caught, but there was no answer. He continued to do that for each window, but even so, there was no response.

(The next one is the last.....)

"Count, if you're there, please answer."

If I don't see him here, then the possibility of meeting him will be lost. Herscherik prayed as he put some strength into the hand holding the pocket watch.

"Who's there?"

Without a doubt, that voice was the one he heard in the banquet hall—the voice belonging to the man with the light blonde hair.



On the other side of the iron bars, Herscherik was about to raise his voice in delight when he heard the answer from the jail, but he covered his mouth in a panic. If he raised his voice and was noticed by the surrounding soldiers, then all of his work till now would have been for naught.

Herscherik bent forward, carefully drew closer to the barred window, and peered inside. When he did, there was Count Luzeria inside the prison with his coat removed. Luzeria looked up to the window where Herscherik peered down to see the inside; their gazes met.

As Luzeria wasn't expecting anyone to appear, he opened his eyes wide and stood still. Herscherik observed the frozen Count Luzeria's condition. Numerous places on his

clothes were covered with dirty spots and conspicuous tears.

The first thing that caught Herscherik's attention was the injury on Luzeria's forehead that most likely came from when he was arrested. He probably didn't receive any treatment in the prison as there were traces of blood running down.

"Is the injury on your forehead alright?"

The first thing that was on his mind escaped Herscherik's mouth.

There's no way that he's alright. He reconsidered and immediately regretted. This person who holds the rank of Count suffered violent treatment and ended up in such a place.

Luzeria was still shocked, so Herscherik extended his hand and presented the pocket watch. His initial purpose for coming here was to return this to the count.

"I came here to return this to you. It's important to you, right?"

".....Yes, it's very important."

"I'm glad I could deliver it to you."

Count Luzeria accepted the pocket watch from Herscherik. He closed his eyes in a nostalgic look and stroked the pocket watch. Then he gripped it tightly, closed his eyes, and made a pained expression like he was holding back the bitterness.

The moment Herscherik sensed the trouble in his expression and was about to ask about it, Luzeria returned his gaze to the prince. The gaze was so straightforward that the question couldn't leave Herscherik's throat.

The count knelt down on one knee there and lowered his head towards the prince, which Herscherik later learned that it was a sign of respect as his retainer.

"Your Highness Herscherik, I apologize for spoiling your long-awaited banquet last night."

Herscherik shook his head at Count Luzeria's words.

"Do not worry. It's fine. More importantly, Count, please tell me about yourself."

"...About me?"

Luzeria rose up from his humble position and casually repeated the prince's words. His voice had astonishment mixed in.

"I am a traitor who tried to deceive the minister and was arrested instead. My being here is the unquestionable proof of that fact."

Count Luzeria's words were mixed with scorn in no way directed towards Herscherik but towards himself. Herscherik sensed the emotions contained in his tone and opened his mouth, thinking that it can't go on like this.

"Count Luzeria, I don't want to know the facts swirling around the air, but your truth."

Herscherik stared straight at him and continued to speak without averting his eyes.

"I came out this far because I wanted to hear the Luzeria's story from the Luzeria's mouth, not from the words of other people. No matter what others say, I want to hear what you have to say."

There is only one fact. Because that is the reality of what happened.

When one truth is fulfilled, people react, feel, and think about the truth through their own thoughts and perspective. But there are as many truths as there are people. Herscherik didn't want to become like those people who easily and arbitrarily decide that if someone says it's a fact, then it's the fact.

Herscherik continued to speak without averting his gaze..... He was only a child who just yesterday was celebrating his 3rd birthday. He had a mature tone, and his unclouded eyes were fixed on the count as he gulped.

(Within these past years, I wondered if there were people who would speak to me like this...)

The answer was no. He was never spoken to like a prince by anyone during his time in this world. Even if he was spoken to like that, the words could only be interpreted as nothing more than excessive gossip or judgmental feelings. However, this prince's words were like water as they seeped into this dried-out man's heart. As Herscherik kept pressing, Count Luzeria began to tell his tale.

".....I was, caught in a trap."

He paused for several beats before continuing his story in a grave tone.

The beginning was 3 years ago when he noticed a certain noble's corruption. He learned that that noble, a viscount, took part in an illegal fraud, so he reported it to the Bureau of Legal Affairs. Normally, the corruption would warrant a revocation of his title, but the viscount got away with just a stern warning.

Additionally, Luzeria felt doubtful and with his sense of justice, he began to investigate by himself the events related to this corruption. In the end, he discovered that Minister Barbasse and his faction were behind the corruption, and the minister was doing this for his own gains.

"I thought that at this rate, the country will decline and be destroyed."

In order for the nobles to line their pockets, they acted as dictators and raised the taxes. Citizens who couldn't pay their taxes were worried about the necessities to live and wandered out in the streets. Life had become difficult for them, so they turned to a life of crime, causing public order to deteriorate. The taxes had to be raised again to control them.

It was clear that this cycle of negatives would cause this country to decay.

"It was right around that time when I was planning on recruiting like-minded comrades to return the government to the status quo. My wife and child died in an accident..... my son was only 3 years old, just like Your Highness."

While he was in the middle of being heartbroken, thinking it was an accident, a secret letter was delivered to him. The contents were a warning, telling him to not pry any further.

"There is no proof, but they were the ones who stole the life of my wife and child by covering it as an accident to set an example to me and those that shared my concerns for the country. After that, my comrades were struck by bad luck one by one, and our group fell apart."

Despite all that, Count Luzeria didn't give up. The hatred he had for having his beloved family stolen from him drove him onwards. In consequence Luzeria thought that without those feelings, he wouldn't have lived this far as he gripped the pocket watch tightly.

"That is why I decided to fight despite being alone. I gathered as much evidence as I could within these 3 years and reported them to His Majesty. However, the result was

what played out yesterday.”

The secret letter that he knew nothing about along with the imperial seal were probably forged. If one searches for a document, one can easily imitate the author’s handwriting and create a forged secret letter in a blink of an eye. That, or it could also be that the evidence he was holding was bait to lure him out.

As a result of surrendering himself to anger, he was caught in their trap just as planned.

“This country was a powerful country in the continent for many years. It had vast land and military strength. And the connection between the royal family and the foreign countries brought about a perpetual peace.”

What was currently protecting the Greisis Kingdom was: the continued 500 years of history, its vast territory, the relations between fellow royalty, and its military strength. All of those manage to protect it from foreign countries.

However, that was only on the surface. The long-lasting peace was slowly beginning to decay from the inside.

Furthermore, a great number of countries that have begun to gather power appeared. If word of turmoil in the internal affairs of Greisis Kingdom, a country whose name was known throughout the whole continent as a great power, was ever be leaked to other countries, then it would create an opening for them to take advantage of the kingdom’s state.

“It was before Your Highness was born, between the time His Majesty was born and when he took the throne. A most violent time when royalty and the nobles opposed each other.”

At that time, Count Luzeria was still young and he uncovered these facts by connecting the information he gathered like a puzzle.

According to Herscherik, the king who reigned during his grandfather’s time was a man with keen eyes. He kept a watchful eye on the aristocrats’ corruptions. Yet he was unable to strip them of the ranks or dismiss them as they cleverly hid the proof of their corruption.

“It was at that moment. Misfortune fell upon the country. Members of the royal family, one by one, were falling all over the place due to sickness.”

Now that he thought back to it, was it really because of disease?

The keen-eyed king passed away due to sickness and the first and second prince followed. The only one left was the third prince who had no influential backing. As he was only 10 years old, Barbasse became his guardian and was bestowed the position of regent.

By the time the young king became an adult and Barbasse was returned to the position of minister, the factions that opposed the minister and the royal family faction of influential aristocrats were all practically purged. Those left alive had their influence significantly lessened, and they could no longer oppose the minister. And before anyone had realized it, the minister's faction was seizing control of the government.

"I was still young and had no interest in the country's government. I was only the son of a regional lord, so by the time I realized it, it was too late..... Your Highness, I apologize."

Count Luzeria concluded and bowed his head. He was knocked down with a sense of helplessness and looked like he would disappear at any moment. Herscherik saw him quite small despite being an adult.

Everything was stolen and the "hope" he had turned out to be fake. Count Luzeria had nothing left for him.

"I'm sorry."

The words that spilled out of Herscherik were an apology. Count Luzeria wasn't expecting such words, so he looked upwards and saw Herscherik, whose eyes were welling up with tears as he tried to keep back from crying.

"I'm sorry for not knowing anything. I, didn't notice anything, even though, you worked so hard for us. I'm sorry....."

Herscherik's sentences were disconnected as he tried to hold back the tears.

(In spite of losing everything, he was still fighting... all by himself.)

He lost his family and parted with his comrades; even though he was alone, Luzeria fought.

Ryouko also parted with her family. As soon as he remembered his past life's family, he would want to cry. He wondered how his father, mother, and sisters were doing in Japan. His own sentiments on top of his empathy towards Count Luzeria caused Herscherik's brimming eyes to overflow.

I miss Japan. I want to go home.

Herscherik pushed down those feelings to the depths of his heart to preserve himself, but the seal broke and they spilled out.

(I always deceive my own feelings.)

Even if he did it unconsciously, this was the only way for him to lessen the pain by preserving himself. But it was different for Count Luzeria, for he accepted it before confronting everything.

Herscherik believed that this was his reality.

".....Will you believe me? I may be spewing out convenient facts to you, deceiving you."
"People who try to deceive people won't ever confess such a thing themselves."

Herscherik declared to Luzeria and stood up.

"I will speak to Father to release you immediately. If you have any other pieces of evidence, they should be able to stop the minister's conspiracy right away. Please wait!"

Herscherik said and started running without waiting for a reply.

(I can't lose him..... to the death penalty!)

Herscherik returned to the path, making sure that he wouldn't be caught by anyone. Soon those who work in the castle will be waking up. There were several dangerous encounters, but Herscherik managed to finally arrive at the inner palace, and he headed towards his father's private room.

He had heard about the room from his father, but this would be the first time he has ever visited it. He thought that there might be the chance that someone was in the room, but a light shone through the gap in the door of the king's private room, despite

how early it was.

Herscherik didn't knock on the door and opened it without any hesitation.

"Father!"

"...Hersche?"

His father was sitting by himself on the sofa in front of the fireplace. The fire in the fireplace had already burned out, but the nearby lighting gave off a warm light.

"This early in the morning, what's wrong? Are you no good in the morning? And those clothes....."

Herscherik checked his own appearance; his coat, pants, and shoes were covered with dirt and several leaves were stuck on him. One could easily see right away from his outfit that he went out somewhere.

However, Herscherik drew closer without caring about that and pulled on his father's clothes with his tiny and dirty hands.

"Father, please listen!"

Herscherik's angry look did not belong to that of a 3 year old. He would usually pretend to be a 3 year old child, but he couldn't afford to keep up the façade now.

Since someone's life depended on this.

No, perhaps there were even more people's lives at stake.

Thinking that, Herscherik didn't care about keeping up the act that he was a 3 year old.

"Count Luzeria isn't a traitor! He isn't, bad. He was..... de... c... ei... ved....."

He was crying in the end to the point where even he himself couldn't understand what he was saying. He tried his hardest to look upwards at his father, but the tears overflowed and blurred his vision, making it very hard to see his father's beautiful face.

Feelings such as regret, longing, and sadness... they all swelled up inside him.

The wave of numerous feelings, for the first time since being reincarnated, surged forth like a tidal wave, and the tears and cries burst forth.

“Death penalty, and such, no good.....”

Unless he could speak in a more logical order, he wouldn’t be understood. He realized this, but all that came out of his mouth was simple words.

He managed to not break down crying by grabbing onto his father’s clothes. However, he was supposed to be looking up, but before he realized it, his gaze was on the carpet.

“...Herscherik.”

The father gently stroked his son’s head, picked him up, and stood up. He always held his son, but the child felt somewhat heavy today. Rather than it being his weight, the king thought that it was his presence that increased.

And then, he suddenly called out to his butler who was awaiting orders.

“I’ll be going outside. I’ll be back for breakfast. ”

“As you wish.”

The king nodded at the short reply and turned his face towards Herscherik. The youngest prince showed an emotion he hadn’t done so far. His white cheeks as well as his eyes were swollen and red.

“Want to go for a little walk with your dad?”



Soleil, King of the Greisis Kingdom, left his room while holding his son.

The inside of the castle was already bustling with the start of the morning preparation. The mornings of the officials and servants of the inner palace, and the maids were especially early. In a country where members of the royal family living all over the place, the inner palace has the highest number of aristocrats living there. As such, the workers cannot have a single moment of negligence.

On this morning, none of the workers turned around to stop the king from walking. Of course, there was no one who could stop the king. The only one who could stop the king's walk was no longer in this world: Herscherik's mother, the king's favorite mistress.

"Ara? Is my husband going to ignore his wife?"

She was the kind of woman to say that while giving a sweet smile. There were famous stories within the inner palace of how she would unreasonably pull the king away from his piles of work every day and force him to take a break. This was seen as nothing more than a selfish whim from his favorite mistress, but no one could find fault with her when they saw how it always improved the king's complexion from unwell to excited. Instead, all the workers would applaud her in secret.

Soleil suddenly recalled those memories with a bitter smile.

(I remembered such a nostalgic thing..... maybe it's because I'm with Hershe.)

The king looked at his precious child in his arms; Herscherik was at the moment burying his face in his father's shoulders and stifling his cries.

The king stroked his head to calm him down and quickened his pace.

The king continued that pace, leaving the inner palace and heading towards the stables. There, a caretaker was already fixing a saddle on a chestnut mare and stood on standby. His tactful butler, who has been with the king for such a long time, had probably sent a message.

The king's precious child had begun to calm down, so the king placed him up on the saddle first. He then gallantly straddled his beloved horse and took the reins.

"Hersche, hold on tightly so you don't fall."

Herscherik nodded and checked that his hands were firmly on the saddle. The king wrapped one arm around his son's waist and took the reins with the other.

His beloved horse had been with him as long as the butler, and it slowly started to exit the stable from the back at the same time as its passengers finished their preparations.

"I'm going to speed up a bit, ok?"

The king said as he put some strength into the arm around his son and increased the pace of his beloved horse.

When they left the back gate of the royal castle, there were no private houses around. The reason for such was that the imperial city encompassing the royal castle was located in the southern area of the country. Further south was a large span of nature that belonged to the royal family. In that span, there were meadows, dense forests, and a tall mountain that has looked down on the Greisis Kingdom since its founding. This place was a special land where only the king, the royal family, and those allowed by the king could enter.

The king's horse galloped to the top of a grass-covered hill where one can see the cityscape of the royal castle and imperial city in one glance. The sun had begun to rise and smoke rose up from chimneys all over the place, probably from citizens preparing their breakfast.

"This place is my favorite place. You're the second person I've brought here."

The king said as he dismounted the horse and picked Herscherik up from the horse's back.

It was the first time Herscherik rode on a horse, so his body moved up and down even more than expected and his butt was injured with each impact. If he was on the horse for another 10 minutes, he would have been crying for a totally different reason than his previous one.

The horse had no riders anymore so it walked a little bit away and started to eat the grass.

The king looked to his side, checking his beloved horse's situation. He sat on the ground while holding his son before placing him on his knee.

"Wait a bit."

The way Soleil said that was as if he was singing a song. Herscherik couldn't follow his words, but the wind blew around them, as if responding to the words. The grass around them waved like a whirlwind and at the same time the king's song ended, the wind blew outwards and left them.

Herscherik didn't understand what just happened. But he understood that something did happen.

“...The first person I brought here was your mom. What do you think your mom said when she first came here? She said, ‘I’m hungry! I should have packed some food!’ ”

Herscherik, at first, couldn’t catch up with everything that was happening, but his father smiled at him while he reminisced.

His father somewhat felt different from usual. His usual father would give a gentle smile that had a shadow somewhere and was wrapped in sorrow. However, now he had a natural smile on his face, without any shadow.

Herscherik didn’t know what to say so he was silent. Therefore, the king let out a bitter laugh and looked over at the royal castle being cast over by the morning sun. Then he slowly began to tell his story. His tone seemed like he was reading a picture book out loud.

“.....A certain king, you see, is a puppet. He appeared to be honored by many people, but in truth, he is nothing more than a puppet controlled by an invisible thread.”

Herscherik intentionally didn’t ask who the story’s king was, because he easily grasped that the king was the one right in front of him: his own father.

“The king wasn’t really expected to become the king. He dreamed of researching and learning about such things as agriculture. He was constantly thinking of how he could be helpful to his father, the king, as well as his older brothers. But one day, his father and brothers passed away due to sickness, and with that, the people who would become king disappeared.”

The young king of only 10 years of age didn’t even know the basics of politics. The villains used the decorated king and took control of the kingdom’s political situation. Even when the king became an adult, the villains continued to control the puppet king as much as they liked.

“In the beginning, the king planned to fight the villains for the sake of the country, the royal family, and the citizens..... but the villains were better.”

Soleil’s face completely changed from his previous smile to an expressionless one in an instant. He probably did that to avoid feeling the pain of remembering what he was going to be talking about.

“To tell you the truth, Herscherik, your eldest sibling isn’t your brother, but your sister. However, she passed away when her younger brother was still inside his mother’s stomach. The same disease that took away my father and brothers, also took your older sister to the Garden in Heaven.”

“The same...?”

“Yes, the same one. A sickness that only affects the royal family. We don’t know the cause. When I was a child, there were no previous outbreaks of this disease, so in the end, they couldn’t find a cure. There was no time to treat my daughter.....”

The king firmly made a fist with the hand that wasn’t supporting Herscherik.

“After that child passed away, the villains said, ‘That’s a shame. I hope this doesn’t happen to the next one’.”

His expressionless face took a complete change into one of anger and bitterness. Herscherik was surprised by how his father, who only knew through gentle expressions, would reveal such negative feelings. Moreover, the contents of his story was already enough to surprise him.

If one were to just look at the surface, then those were consoling words from a retainer to the king. But, if one digs deeper, then he was saying that the same thing might occur. No, even a perceptive person could notice.

Could notice that from the shadows, someone was pulling the strings, killing the king’s father, brothers, and even his first-born child.

When Herscherik noticed that detail, he was surprised. At the same time, his temperature dropped and he felt his blood drained out of him.

(There are humans who could do such a thing...)

There was no proof. But, Herscherik wouldn’t even consider that his father had spout out lies. Furthermore, the story he heard before from Count Luzeria also played a big part.

The first time he met the minister, the minister had the eyes and expression that he looked down and despised people. His own intuition reflexively judged the man to be unpleasant, and it wasn’t wrong.

(It’s cruel, too cruel...)

Why did he do such a thing? Herscherik couldn't wrap his head around it.

In his past life, Ryouko had a niece. The first time she met her niece, she decided to unconditionally love and protect the girl. Even if she was another child, the distance between the two wouldn't change.

He couldn't think of why the minister would kill, nor did he want to think of such.

"...And then, the king stopped fighting. He decided that his family was more important than the country, and its people."

His father concluded with a weak laugh. It seemed to Herscherik that rather than laughing, his father was crying.

(That's why he decided at that moment to become a puppet.)

There was no other option left for Soleil. To protect his family, he had no choice but to listen to the minister's words.

The villain was cunning.

To prevent the king from escaping, he let the king meet his concubines so the minister could increase the number of people he could use as hostages. The princesses and young ladies who became his concubines had no idea what was happening in the background and only entered the inner palace with the hope of supporting the king. As a result, the king couldn't refuse, and the villains planned for such and chose the concubines.

The women weren't idiots either. They entered the inner palace, learned of its situation, and couldn't move either. The women became just like the king. As the king wanted to protect his family, the women wanted to protect theirs. They mutually wanted to protect each other, so they became unable to move.

With the exception of just one person.

"Herscherik, truthfully, I didn't want to be with your mother."

Just one, only one woman was different. Only she laughed at the situation and said to the puzzled Soleil.

‘Does there need to be a reason for me to be with the person I love? I’ll beat up those third-rate bad guys that come from some third-rate drama!’

The woman boasted and adapted into the inner palace; she supported the consorts who fell into depression as well as loving their children like her own.

She paid no mind to the taunts of the minister and aristocrats and talked down to them with her words instead. She was a noble and kind woman who was scared of nothing.

However, such a woman could not go against Heaven’s will. She left her child behind and went on ahead first to the Garden in Heaven. Her only grace was that she didn’t die at the hands of the villains.

“That’s why, Hersche, I will protect you. I’ve always thought so since you were born.”

(...So that’s how it was.)

In his previous life, he had enjoyed many fantasy stories, manga, and games. Carrying such memories, Herscherik felt that this world was uncomfortable.

Even though he was a prince, there was only his nanny, Meria, to take care of him. In any story, there are usually attendants, servants, employees, and maids surrounding the prince. He had originally thought that because he was the 7th prince and thus on the bottom of the list of many princes, his position was a bit difficult, so his one servant was the result of reducing labor costs. But, the king had placed Meria near his son, as she was the only nanny he could trust. If anyone else was placed near his child, he would have to be vigilant. This was a very efficient method.

Furthermore, the fact that the father goes to meet his son without any set time was to check his well-being. Even if the servants of the inner palace were bribed, and the king could go meet him at any time, then it would be difficult for them to get closer to his son. He had done this thoroughly to prevent the possibility of the aristocrats approaching his son.

Besides, the youngest prince, unlike his older siblings, had no more relatives left to support him. If the king gets threatened again and they had to use someone, the possibility that it would be Herscherik is high, especially since the risk of using him is low.

“The moment he appeared in yesterday’s banquet, I thought that he could defeat the

villains for me.”

However, that was only a fleeting dream. He too was already a puppet, dancing on the palm of the villains’ hands.

“.....Herscherik, you probably hate this selfish, disgusting king, right?”

Herscherik shook his head after thinking for a moment about those words.

(If I was in the same position as him, I think I probably would’ve done the same.)

He would put the protection of his precious family over those whose faces he doesn’t even know.

As a king, he probably was the worst. Even Herscherik understood that.

The existence known as a king must be selfless and stand alone in superiority. An excellent king is selfless, placing his priority on the nation and citizens over his beloved wife and children who share his own blood. He may even use his family for the sake of the country. That is his responsibility and duty as the king.

If one looks at those qualities, then Soleil was definitely a failure of a king.

But as a person, could someone call him the worst?

He killed “himself” and endured humiliation for the sake of those precious to him. If it was a normal family, then no one could find fault in him.

However, he was the king.

He continues to bear the responsibility of a throne that he didn’t want, even to this day. There’s no doubt that this father was too kind, suffering every day and night under this responsibility.

To Herscherik, his father looked like a very kind and splendid person. But to the citizens, he probably looked like a very feeble king.

Herscherik just realized it now, for his father’s clothes were the same one he wore for yesterday’s banquet. He probably sat in front of the fireplace, unable to sleep all night as he thought about his troubles. He was most likely wondering what he could possibly do to save everyone.

“...In that case, the king just needs to defeat the villains, right?”

Just send the puppeteer to the gallows. The one who can do that is the king who holds that power. Hercherik knew that this was the wrong answer to his father’s question, but he couldn’t help but ask.

The father gave a sad smile and stroked his youngest son’s head.

“The one who will do such a thing isn’t a king, but a dictator. I would rather be called a feeble king than a dictator..... I don’t want to be the same as them. I really am a no-good king, you know.”

But that was his only pride Soleil had as a person, and as a king.

Although he was following what they told him, it’s not like he followed everything. Even if he was a king that was looked down upon.

Even while he was at his wit’s end, he continued to walk this tightrope to protect the citizens from the minister and his faction, even for a little. That was all Soleil could do.

As his father calmly told his story, Herscherik didn’t move, as if time itself had stopped.

King and dictator.

There were parts where the two resembled each other, but there was also a wall that needed to be crossed over. For a dictator, even if he was to use his power and execute the puppet master without any proof, another one would be born. If he forcibly used his power just once, the same thing will just occur again. And then he will have to use his power again. His unrestrained power would no longer become efficient and this will cause the country to decay, inviting demise to befall. There were plenty of countries that had disappeared like that in his past life’s world.

Herscherik could understand. But he couldn’t agree.

“But..... that’s!”

(He’ll will die!)

Herscherik tried to stop his tears, but they overflowed. Helplessness engulfed Herscherik—the reality that his father had on the largest shackles and his own reality where he couldn’t do anything no matter how much he thought about it.

Herscherik jumped into his father's chest. He couldn't help but cry, feeling very pitiful and helpless.

The beloved horse looked at the parent and child from afar.



When the owner of the room returned, one man was waiting to greet them.

"Welcome home."

The one who greeted them with a perfect 90° bow was the butler. He was a man in his 30s with very dark, green hair ¹.

With his eyes of the same color, the man switched his gaze from the king of Greisis Kingdom, Soleil, standing before him to the 7th prince in his arms who passed out from crying, Herscherik.

"I just got back. Sorry to ask this of you, but can you arrange the bedroom? And contact Meria as well? She's probably in a panic right now."

"As you wish."

After he gave his short reply, the butler immediately fixed the bed. Though saying that, he only needed to arrange it as Soleil, who should have been using it, didn't have a single wink of sleep.

After the butler left the bedroom and Soleil checked it, the king laid his son on the bed and covered him with the futon. Then he wiped away the traces of the tears with his finger and stroked the child's head. Every little action was filled with love.

He left the room without making a sound and as soon as he closed the door, Soleil let out a deep sigh.

(It might have been too early to tell him that story.)

The day I must tell the truth will come sooner or later. Soleil prepared himself for such. He was prepared. But, he didn't think that the day to tell him would come this fast.

".....Soleil, did you explain everything?"

Seeing the king let out such a deep sigh, the butler, who up till now was restrained, called out to him like a worried friend. No, in reality, the butler was worried about the king himself. He was the king's only trusted friend. As a childhood friend, he was one of the few people Soleil could trust.

"Were you cautious of your surroundings?"

The trusted friend looked at him with discerning eyes. Soleil nodded his head.

"Yeah, I more or less investigated the surroundings and checked if a barrier had been put up just in case before I started to talk, so it was fine... Besides, normally you wouldn't think that I would be having such an important conversation with a 3 year old."

"Yeah, you're right. But still, to think that first one to come to talk to you would be the youngest prince. That was quite unexpected."

The butler was also expecting the princes and princess to one day notice the kingdom's situation and come to ask the king. But, neither the king nor the butler even considered that the first one to do so would be the youngest prince.

They had thought that within a few years, the first prince would be the first one to come.

Soleil had made up his mind that if his children ever came to ask, he would tell them the whole truth as it was, because that was his duty as both the king and their father. Whether to remain royalty or relinquish their title and live freely..... or even to side with the aristocrats, this decision is up to them

(Speaking of which, Hersche is a little different from the other princes.)

He grew up just like the other children until he was 1 year old. After he passed the age of 1, the first thing to change was that he barely cried anymore.

Instead, his eyes seemed to closely observe the subtleties of people. He started to become independent, changing his clothes and feeding himself.

It could be said that it was an infant's attempt at selfishness, but the bottom line was that he was an obedient child. He didn't have any outburst of emotions nor did he get angry. He controlled his emotions just like an adult. Now that Soleil thought about it, Herscherik was an early bloomer to have a sense of selfishness and technique.

Furthermore, when he met Herscherik, he saw some kind of restraint or embarrassment in him. He had thought that the child might have hated him, but after confirming with Meria, that wasn't the case.

Rather than calling it restraint, it was more like he wasn't used to be spoiled... However, it was no exaggeration to say that the Herscherik who came to plead for Count Luzeria's release appeared to reveal his true feelings.

"But the prince is only 3 years old, right? Couldn't you have cleverly made up something?"

Or rather, you should have made up something. The butler conveyed with his eyes. The youngest prince was just too young for this.

"I couldn't. Not with him looking at me with those eyes."

Soleil thought for just a second how he would have deceived him. The youngest prince was really too young. He thought that he could have smoothed things over without telling the truth and delayed the conversation to a later date.

But the king looked at the child's straightforward eyes filling with tears, and he realized that a poorly-made-up story wouldn't work. Moreover, if he conveyed the cruel fact that he was a puppet and he couldn't save Luzeria, then the boy would give up on his plead.

"What's today's schedule?"

".....After breakfast, you have a meeting with Minister Barbasse. It'll be about the count's situation."

"I see."

Soleil let out a deep sigh for the second time. That man who has dominance over the inner palace was quick to take measures. He probably intended to end everything without giving the king any time. No, this was already within his plan. He was *that* kind of man.

(Is there nothing I can do.....)

Ever since he had become king, Soleil was assaulted by the feeling of helplessness so many times. He thought all night long about a plan to successfully set Luzeria free, but

nothing came to mind.

That speaks of how meticulous of a trap Barbasse had laid for Count Luzeria. The minister had utilized Luzeria's fatal desire to make the minister pay.

He completely intended to get rid of Count Luzeria. And he was going to make the king his accomplice and force him to shoulder the blame.

"Soleil, if you command me, I can handle the count and....."

"No."

The king interrupted his childhood friend. It was a rare and violent tone for the king.

"But..."

"If you do that, you'll be his next target. It's fine if I am the only one who will carry this burden."

His childhood friend's words became stronger, so the king shook his head to stop him. The childhood friend could definitely set Luzeria free—letting him escape the prison and sheltering him at his home far away from the royal capital. But if he had done so, then he and his family would be the next targets.

He belonged to a Marquis family, but they had already been exiled from the royal capital because of Barbasse's influence. But that was better than losing their lives. Those influential families who joined in the animosity towards Barbasse had unnatural deaths, either through an accident or some strange means. There was also the difficulty in preserving one's status in this line of work. There were no visible traces of Barbasse's involvement in any of them. No matter how unnatural they looked, no one could raise any objections. That was how much the minister controlled the country.

The most Soleil could do as the king, was hold the minister and his faction's reins so they don't get too carried away. But even so, that doesn't even establish half of what happened.

Soleil looked down at his own powerless hand. His own hand has already been stained without having any direct involvement in these schemes.

He sensed that he lost his daughter when he met with the minister. He was forced to understand that. That the only one who could protect his family from this beast of a

man is the king himself.

“.....You can scorn me as much as you like, Luke.”

Soleil called out his childhood friend's name for the first time after a long while. The two were together since they were children. They had the same nanny and were raised in the same manner.

His childhood friend who was deemed frail let out a bitter laugh.

“I will fall together to the depths of the world with you, Soleil.”

He didn't say that as the king's chief butler but as the king's friend.

A nostalgic scene spread out in front of him.

Herscherik..... No, Hayakawa Ryouko knew that this was a dream.

Her body weightlessly floated around and her surroundings were black and white like in an old television. She recalled from a certain article she read that dreams are created originally from the dreamer's memories, so there's no color attached to them. It's just the dreamer's assumption that there is color.

The nostalgic scene before her was her own home.

She moved when she was an elementary school student to this house, which was constructed 25 years ago. The youngest of the three sisters was about to be born around that time, so her father worked hard in place of the mother, to watch over the middle sister and to prepare for the move.

When they moved, it was a sparkling clean, brand new house. 25 years later, it was still standing, but it appeared quite old, but to Ryouko, it was still her precious home.

Underneath the gloomy sky, there was a sign that said “Hayakawa Family” placed by the entranceway for a wake. People wearing dark mourning clothes were coming in and out in shifts.

(A funeral..... wake?)

Ryouko became intrigued and unsteadily floated inside her house. She passed by several relatives whose faces she vaguely remembered along the way, but it seemed that no one could see nor sense her presence.

As soon as she passed by the entranceway and entered the living room, there was her niece sitting on the sofa. Her eyes were swollen red as she gripped a handkerchief. Next to her, Ryouko's younger sister's husband looked over his daughter with an anxious look. Ryouko thought that it was rare for this rebellious niece to stick this close to her father.

Ryouko continued further in, past the living room and into a Japanese-style room which once belonged to her grandmother. It was the room with the best sun exposure as well as the place where her grandmother stayed until her dementia became too much to handle. It seemed like the people wearing the mourning clothes were coming in and out of this room.

Ryouko understood when she peeked inside the Japanese-style room.

(Aah, so that's what's happening.)

The room was enveloped in the smell of incense. The people wearing mourning clothes and offering numerous flowers were her family members and her superiors at work. Her own picture was placed in a memorial frame and her unmoving body was laid on top of the futon.

(Is this my wake?)

It was very real for a dream. Or rather, since dreams are created from organized memories, this was one heck of a delusion.

Plus, looking down on her own dead body was a very strange feeling.

In any case, Ryouko was glad that even though she was in a traffic accident, her body didn't splatter everywhere. She heard that her body had suffered serious injuries from the accident, wrapped in bandages like a mummy and was already placed inside the coffin. These were only rumors, so she had no way of knowing if this was fact or not.

"I extend my sincerest condolences at this time."

"No, it is us who should be thanking you for taking time out of your day to be here."

Her direct superior and her mother were exchanging words. Her father was just staring expressionlessly at her picture in the memorial frame. In place of the unmoving father, her younger sisters were greeting the relatives and those who came to visit.

“My daughter had always hated having her picture taken..... so we were in quite a pinch in looking for a recent photo of her. As such, we are very indebted to you for allowing us to use the picture from your company outing.”

(That’s because I don’t like pictures.)

It wasn’t that she hated her own face but she didn’t really like it either. Ever since elementary school, she was bullied and called “ugly hag.” And when she had to line up for school photos, her face looked bigger than other girls. That’s why, when the photo-booth craze started, she would strongly decline any invitations to join in.

(Especially since my jaw got lower and a double chin started to appear.....)

As the company outing photo was a group photo, she was forced to join in. That’s probably why the Ryouko in the memorial frame looked a bit displeased.

“Our company was also very indebted to Ms. Hayakawa. Even during our most difficult times, she helped us with her go-getter smile and lively voice.”

“Yes, we had an agreement at the branch office to contact Ms. Hayakawa of the main office for consultation during troubled times.”

The one speaking was the chief area leader in sales, who stood above everyone else now. He was a very busy man, so Ryouko couldn’t believe that he would come to her wake as she was only a clerk at the main office.

“Ms. Hayakawa was excellent at taking care of people. And despite being strict in places, she never abandoned those in need. There were many of those in the district branches who wanted to participate in this wake, but I have humbly come here as their representative.”

(Is that why you addressed me like that almost every day.....?)

She was made to recall her previous life’s workplace. Outside of the usual work, he would often make phone calls, asking for her.

She wanted to retort with “No matter how you look at it, it has nothing to do with me!” as he asked questions about the branch manager, area-leader-level workers, and even foreign branch workers—employees from unrelated departments.

“Heey, you doing well, little Ryou~? By the way, I got something I wanna ask.....”

Of course she couldn’t say, “In the meantime, stop calling me ‘little Ryou’”, to a person in the managerial position. Now that she thought about it, that was probably sexual harassment, but at the same time, she was too busy to even care about such a thing. Being asked such, she became curious herself. She investigated everything about the other departments, reported, and gave suggestions. Thanks to that, she ended up picking up all aspects of the jobs of departments with which she had no connections. Furthermore, she fell into a chain of phone rings from within the company expecting her help.

(Well, I don’t mind being relied on, so it’s fine.)

There were times when she really didn’t understand what kind of job she had in the main branch. She didn’t have the actual feeling of coming in contact with the customers like a branch officer nor seeing how the sales grew. But when she heard the thanks after being relied on, she thought, “Ah, I was useful,” as she was filled with a sense of accomplishment.

I want to know things I don’t understand. I want to be needed by someone. Her superiors and the area leaders took it as favorable, but now that she thought back to it, her actions were full of self-satisfaction.

(Somehow, I’m getting embarrassed knowing that I was a petty brat and my superiors were thinking too highly of me.....)

No one at the wake could see how Ryouko was troubled, but her mother closed her eyes, delighted at their words.

“Is that so.....”

With that response, her mother looked considerably tired and had thinned cheeks. She looked like she had suddenly aged 10 years older and had grown smaller.

“Since Ryouko never talked about her work at home..... I’m relieved that she was a

great help to everyone.”

Her mother said this as she gazed at Ryouko’s picture.

“She was the eldest daughter and I also relied on her, one way or another. I thought that was the reason why she delayed on marrying, but according to everyone’s stories, it seems that she spent every day, very fulfilled.”

Ryouko remembered.

In her previous life, her work, day after day, was by no means easy. There were unpleasant things, and there were even times when she thought about quitting and writing a letter of resignation. Nevertheless, she continued working and it was all thanks to her family, her superiors and co-workers at work.

The words of her boss and mother were the answer to Ryouko’s life.

She worked with her utmost effort, immersed herself in her favorite hobby, and spent her time together with her precious family. Although she lost all of that in an instant because of the accident, she could reflect on how she persevered and lived her common everyday life.

From another person’s view, her life definitely wasn’t splendid. But to Ryouko, it was the best life she had.

When she woke up, there was an unfamiliar ceiling.

Her memories were in chaos because of the dream, but Herscherik reached the conclusion that he had apparently fallen asleep after the conversation with his father.

As he was probably inside his father’s room, the bed was of the highest quality and the thick curtain blocked the sunlight.

“This is wrong.....”

Herscherik whispered as he got up. He looked at his two hands that had become much smaller compared to his previous life and gripped them tightly.

That might have been a convenient dream. But Ryouko’s life was mediocre but the best; her hard work was rewarded.

But how was this world?

Those who do the right thing weren't rewarded yet those who excelled at deception one-sidedly scoffed at the weak.

"This world is absolutely wrong."

Within these two years since he reincarnated into this world, he had done nothing. How many humans have shed tears? How many have lost their lives?

He was very upset at himself and once again cried at his helplessness.



Although it was early spring, the sun had set and the temperature inside the prison had dropped. When Count Luzeria exhaled, a white puff of smoke entered the air. Luzeria sat on top of his simple bed, experiencing his second night inside the prison. He absentmindedly stared up at the tiny window, his only connection to the outside world.

(I wonder if His Highness Herscherik is alright.)

The sight of the youngest prince, with his blonde hair and blue eyes as he presented the pocket watch by himself this morning, lingered in Luzeria's mind.

He first met the prince during the banquet, and his first impression of the boy was a prince who had the same weak feeling as the king. Those blue eyes he inherited from his father anxiously wavered as they looked around the banquet. To Luzeria, his presence gave off an even more fleeting impression: from the faint glint in his eyes, like the pale light that falls through the dark clouds, to the pale color of his blonde hair that was by no means magnificent.

But the Prince Herscherik who appeared before him yesterday was a different person. Although some anxiety was still there, his eyes had a much stronger light compared to the time at the banquet. In addition, the prince's eyes were a gentle shade of jade as he asked about his injuries, causing Count Luzeria to be unable to avert his gaze.

It was by no means because of fear.

The moment he looked at the prince, feelings of awe and respect dominated him and he was no longer able to turn away from those eyes.

Luzeria instinctively acted as a retainer, kneeling down in respect and telling the prince everything after being pressed. After the prince had listened to everything till the end, he said that he would stop Luzeria's death penalty and ran off.

(I hope he is safe.....)

Despite being on the brink of his life, Luzeria's heart was filled with only the youngest prince.

Maybe it was because the youngest prince was the same age as his deceased son, resembling him somewhere. Though, his son had neither blonde hair nor blue eyes and definitely was not as beautiful as Herscherik.

He heard footsteps from the exit all of a sudden. Judging from the footsteps, it appeared to be one person. Luzeria easily guessed who it could be, but since he wasn't interested, he continued to look up at the window.

The footsteps stopped in front of his room.

"Nice situation you have here, Count Luzeria."

As he had expected this, Luzeria let out a sigh deep in his mind and faced the voice. There, the source of it was a man.

"What do you want, Viscount Grimm?"

"Humph, I'm an count now."

The man of medium build raised the corners of his mouth in a smile, and made a triumphant face.

He was Viscount Grimm, an aristocrat who was part of Minister Barbasse's faction. One of the corruptions Count Luzeria uncovered was this viscount's embezzlement of the national treasures. He had filed a false report and illegally received large amounts of money.

"So, did the new count come here to see the face of a criminal? I'm envious of how much free time you have."

Count Luzeria gave a melancholic answer, so Viscount Grimm's triumphant face completely changed into a sour one.

"Hand over *that*. If you do, I'll spare your life."

"*That*? Well, well. What could *that* possibly be, O Honorable Count?"

"Don't piss me off!"

Viscount Grimm kicked the iron door of the prison. The sound that echoed was considerably loud, but the guard didn't come over. Luzeria guessed that Grimm had probably bribed the guard earlier with money.

"That letter in your possession!"

"Aah..... *that*. Hmm."

(That being said, I wonder which one...)

Count Luzeria was puzzled but didn't show it on his outer expression.

It took some time, but he had gathered as many pieces of evidence and testimony as possible, resulting in a fairly large amount. He should have had a significant piece of real evidence inside that huge pile, but he couldn't help but regret that his work was a trap.

This affair no longer concerned Count Luzeria now that he'd been locked in prison, but it appeared that there was a particularly nasty piece of evidence judging by Viscount Grimm's panicked expression.

"Even without asking me, you can just search for it."

(Rather, now that I think about it, the fact that he appeared before me after I've been locked up for some time means that my belongings have already been searched and ravaged through.)

Luzeria continued to casually answer while trying to guess the man's intentions.

"I came here to ask because I can't find it!"

Viscount Grimm kicked the iron door once again.

Deep down, he was fed up with these obvious answers. Meanwhile, Count Luzeria furrowed his brow at the unpleasant and noisy sound of the iron door.

“If you tell me its location right now, I’ll talk with the higher-ups to get your death penalty cancelled. Hand over the letter!”

“Do you think I can get away from the death penalty with just negotiations?”

Count Luzeria thought his own voice was terribly cold. He opened the pocket watch in his hand and looked at the clock. It was already 11 o’clock at night.

“For someone like you, who only thinks of his own self-preservation, it’s unthinkable that such a person who had sent assassins after me would give up such a perfect opportunity to get rid of me.”

That person who had sent assassins—Minister Barbasse. He had let Luzeria know that his time was limited as well as that within the pieces of evidence he gathered, there were some that the Minister couldn’t overlook. That’s why Luzeria had bravely come to the royal capital.

(I guess I chose the wrong piece of evidence that the Minister couldn’t overlook.....)

Luzeria mocked himself, closed the pocket watch, and tightly gripped it. By the time he had arrived at the royal palace, he had prepared for the worst-case scenario.

“Go away, Viscount Grimm. Or rather, Count Grimm. I’m grateful to you.”

Count Luzeria let out a scornful laugh. When Grimm saw his face, a cold chill ran through his body from the tip of his toes to the top of his head. It was as if he had been drenched in cold water.

“Thanks to you, I can sacrifice myself for the country. I’ll be heading first, waiting with the Watchmen of the Depths of this Earth for all of you to fall.”

After the living die, the Watchmen are the ones who deliver the souls to the Netherworld. There are two destinations one can go.

Virtuous souls are recognized by the gods and invited to the Garden in Heaven. They will experience the greatest of happiness in the Garden while they wait to be reborn into the next world.

On the other side, sinful souls are punished by the gods and sent to live in the depths

of hell. Hell judges the sins of the souls. The souls must carry their appropriate penance until they are purified, and then they will be reborn to the next world.

The Watchmen are the ones linked to the Gates in the Depths of the Earth. The Watchmen will never overlook a sinner's soul trying to escape. The children of this country grow up being told by their parents, "The Watchmen from the Depths of the Earth will come to get you!"

Count Luzeria's words were that of a sore loser. But, for some reason, Viscount Grimm had the delusion that he himself had lost. That was why he kicked the iron door again, trying to escape that delusion.

"Stop being a sore loser.....! In this world, only the strong and the clever survive. The other foolish people are either used and die, or they rebel and die; those are the only options! That's why I will survive, and you will die!"

Viscount Grimm turned on his heels, and Count Luzeria silently saw him off.

(I can just take my time to search for that. Since his land will be mine.)

Grimm persuaded himself, but the sense of defeat wouldn't go away.

Count Luzeria that was left behind shrugged his shoulders and stroked the pocket watch. And then he firmly pushed the button so it opened, looking at the portrait. It was the only memory of him with his wife and his child.

At that time, his son had just been born. He would often neglect his work to go see the child, causing his wife to often get angry. Days passed and he had been pleased about his son's growth. With his wife beside him, he enjoyed happiness and felt that this world was wonderful.

But now he had lost everything, and might even lose his life tomorrow. Just like that guy said, this world was for the strong and the clever, but did that mean that he couldn't enjoy any happiness? Do the weak have no choice but to accept tyranny?

".....Count."

"Your Highness?"

Just like this morning, peering in from between the iron bars was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, youngest prince.

His face was illuminated by the moonlight, and it appeared to be a bit red and swollen. He looked like he would cry at any moment as he looked downwards at Luzeria.

“Your Highness, I was thinking about it this morning as well, but do you not have an attendant accompanying you? It’s much too dangerous to be moving around by yourself.”

Although he was the youngest, as a prince and especially as a 3 year old child, he was still walking around at night by himself without any attendant. Normally, that would be inconceivable. Herscherik shook his head at the worried Luzeria and was hesitant on what he should do or say.

“Your Highness, what is the matter? Even though it is springtime, the night is cold. Please, return to your room.....”

“I’m sorry, Count Luzeria. I spoke with Father, but it was no good.”

The instant Herscherik interrupted Count Luzeria, large tears spilled out from the boy’s jade eyes.

Herscherik tried to stop the tears by wiping several times with his sleeves and biting down on his lip, but the tears continued to stream down his cheeks.

(Father also tried to do something, but that was impossible.)

But as that seemed like an excuse, it was too hard to say.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry..... I’m.....”

Herscherik resolved to not cry when he arrived here. But when he came face-to-face with Count Luzeria and reported the result of his powerlessness, the tears spilled over and in the end, he was no longer able to speak through his sobbing. He could no longer meet Luzeria’s gaze, cowering and covering his face while not caring about how dirty the ground was.

He despised his powerless self. He didn’t know if it was fine to face Luzeria with this kind of expression.

“.....Your Highness Herscherik, please raise your head.”

Luzeria's kind voice reached the ears of the cowering Herscherik. When he slowly and timidly raised his face, Luzeria's face was right across from him behind the iron bars. He was then presented with the pocket watch.

"Please accept this."

"Eh.....?"

Without waiting for Herscherik's reply, Count Luzeria pushed the pocket watch to him.

"Count, isn't this something precious to you? I cannot accept it!"

"It is unneeded for this man who will become a corpse tomorrow."

Luzeria stopped Herscherik who was panicking and trying to return it. He then wiped away the dirt on the prince's face with his hand, although he thought that it was a bit disrespectful of him.

As it had been quite a while since he had touched a child's skin, he closed his eyes while remembering his past. He was reminded of how his own son would often play in the sand and get it all over his face. When he wiped the sand off his son's face just like he was doing with the prince, the son would happily laugh.

But, the prince didn't laugh like his son. Luzeria thought that it was a bit disappointing.

"Your Highness, thank you very much. Just knowing that this country has someone like you is enough to let me pass on without despair."

When his indictment of the minister ended in failure during the banquet, he had taken a gamble by rolling his pocket watch to someone.

He hoped that someone would notice it.

And he had won that bet.

He had planted the seeds to save this country.

"Your Highness, please grow up healthily. And then, please save this country."

He was aware of the very irresponsible thing he had said. At just 3 years old in addition to being the 7th prince, what could the child possibly do?

But he couldn't help but have expectations. Among all the members of the royal family

in that place, Herscherik was the only one to find the source of the watch, exchange words with Luzeria, and act on his own judgment.

“.....If anyone found you, it would be dangerous for Your Highness. So please return to your room.”

There was no way Luzeria was going to let this hope disappear after all the trouble of finding it in the abyss of death.

“Count Luzeria!”

“...My Lord.”

Count Luzeria removed his hand from the soft cheek, took a step back, and knelt on one knee. He placed his right hand on his chest and lowered his head. The bow was a sign of respect as a retainer.

“My body is the sword that tears your enemies to pieces, the shield that protects you from assassins’ daggers, and the cane that supports you.”

He lowered his head even further.

“Even without being by your side, my spirit shall protect you forever, never separating from you..... so please, forgive me.”

Even though he would die tomorrow, Count Luzeria couldn’t help but declare and add to the end.

He didn’t really care about waiting in the Depths of the Earth for Grimm and the others.

He only thought about wanting to be by the prince’s side.

He wished to have crossed paths with the prince as soon as he could.

If that had been possible, his final moments might have been different.

Herscherik wiped his tears with the sleeve of his coat and stood up. He still knew little of this country’s customs. He didn’t know what he should say to Count Luzeria’s pledge. That’s why he decided to go with the words that popped into his head.

“Count Luzeria, I will permit you this. Your spirit shall be by my side forever, even when your body decays. I will not waste your words, thoughts, nor life.”

Herscherik didn't shed a tear until the end. He then tightly gripped the beautiful, old, silver pocket watch that had been passed on to him.



The room was an extravagant one.

Originally this was one of the audience rooms the king used to greet his guests of honor, but it was now dim with all of the windows covered by a thick curtain. What faint light shone through made the room feel even heavier.

The king sat on the throne, the highest seat, as the minister stood in wait beside him. On his other side, a court officer acting as the facilitator read Count Luzeria's crimes out loud. Around them stood aristocrats and high ranking government officers. Knights stood in a line silently, at guard.

(I was unaware of these added charges..... probably to turn me into their scapegoat.)

Count Luzeria laughed at his current standing.

He was placed in handcuffs, but fine clothes befitting of an aristocrat covered him. His hair had been carefully done, dressing him up like a genuine gentlemen of nobility—all of which made the assaults he received when he was arrested look like a lie.

"You, as a fellow member of this country's aristocracy, have received an amnesty from His Majesty. You have been bestowed the gift of death."

Luzeria was presented with a chalice decorated with gold and jewels.

The gift of death—suicide by poison.

Behind the minister who had solemnly cast his gaze towards the throne, Count Grimm sneered.

The king had a pale blue face, one that could be clearly seen from a distance, as he stared at Count Luzeria. This was the man: Soleil Greisis, King of the Greisis Kingdom and father to Herscherik, to whom he pledged loyalty.

(I thought the two of them looked similar before, but they're completely different.)

This might be a retainer's bias, but the prince who had been basked in moonlight

yesterday definitely hadn't given up like the king in front of him now.

He had, from the bottom of his heart, thought to help Luzeria right after meeting him. And he fully realized how powerless he was.

(Yet, my Lord didn't fall into despair.)

The blue, jade-like eyes of the youngest prince would never give up like the king had.

The handcuffs were removed, and Count Luzeria accepted the golden chalice containing the poisoned wine.

He had no fear of dying. No, the emotion certainly existed, but it was hope that surpassed the fear in his chest.

(O God of Creation, O all Gods, please protect my Lord. And with my Lord.....)

"Eternal Glory to the Greisis Kingdom!"

Count Luzeria drained the golden chalice in one shot.

The echoing sounds of the bell came through the opened window.

Its tolls acted as a guide to the dead. Herscherik was taught by Meria that the bell rang to keep the spirits of the dead from wandering. It didn't care if the soul was good or evil; it rang equally for everyone.

Now the bell was ringing, signaling that Count Luzeria had departed.

Herscherik was sitting in a chair placed by that window, the spring breeze rustling through his blonde hair. The moment he heard the bell, he firmly gripped the pocket watch in his hand.

'In this world, only the strong and the clever survive. The other foolish people are either used and die, or they rebel and die; those are their only two choices!'

He recalled the words of the viscount named Grimm. Herscherik had been hiding so that he wouldn't be discovered, but the man's face was burned in his mind.

(If I remember correctly, Japan was just like that as well.)

He recalled his past life in Japan.

If politicians turned corrupt, then all the media outlets would raise a fuss, crying out about resignation and such. Ryouko was also one of those enraged citizens, wondering what became of her taxes. But influential people wouldn't use their influence to forcefully shut them up. And of course, the politicians' digressions didn't lead to the death penalty.

(But it's different over here.)

Those who held power, the strong and clever, wickedly eliminated those trying to do the right thing.

This world was crueler than those in games or novels.

He had read such genres in his past life. It felt like he had casually passed through the screen into this world, idly passing time since he had been a year old.

'Hersche, what will you do?'

His father had asked him whose tears wouldn't stop after his father had finished his story.

'If you want, you can leave the royal family. You can go become a husband in some safe, foreign country. If you have something you want to do, you can go ahead on that path.'

That was his father's greatest act of love. Even if Herscherik continued to stay in the royal family, he would either be kept as a pet until he died, or he would be killed by the minister's group. Unlike the other princes, he had no support.

If he were ever careless, then they might kill his father and turn Herscherik into their next puppet. And if a civilian rebellion were to occur, the entire royal family would be massacred. Surely the minister was biding his time for that moment, keeping the king alive while holding onto the real power.

If Herscherik followed his father's words, then he probably could keep himself safe. If he left the royal family and forgot everything, he could surely find happiness.

(But what about Father? What about the soul of Luzeria who entrusted and passed everything to me? What about those who are weak?)

“The righteous people, the honest people, and the weak are wronged in this foolish world.”

The spring breeze blew past the window and into the room. It felt like Luzeria was answering his words.

Herscherik jumped down from the chair and tightly gripped the pocket watch one more time while looking up towards the sky.

“Count, you’re nearby, aren’t you?”

The bell rang to send on those deceased. Naturally, Luzeria should have already been heading on his journey to the other world. But last night, Luzeria had sworn to stay by his side forever, even after becoming a soul.

“I won’t run away.”

He was born a prince, and as such, his place at the top was decided; an unchangeable fact, so long as his father remained a scapegoat.

But that was when he had been ignorant. Now that he knew everything, he was in a position to change this world.

He cannot keep crying—he won’t cry anymore.

“I’ll definitely change it. I’ll show you and protect them.”

He will protect his father, the country, and all those ridiculed as weak, without fail.

That moment was the first time Hayakawa Ryouko resolved herself since reincarnating into Herscherik.

Chapter 4

Alphabet, Magic, and Intruder

(Are you serious.....)

Herscherik's unexpected situation had him at a loss.

The day after Count Luzeria left this world, Herscherik decided that increasing his knowledge was necessary if he wanted to change anything. He suggested that he might want to study, and his father, without questioning his son too deeply, immediately arranged for teachers the very next day.

First was language study.

He managed to adapt to this world's alphabet, as it resembled the English he learned back in Japan. Truthfully speaking, English wasn't his strong point, but he had already learned it once in his past life and had experience. The teacher in charge of the language lessons praised him for picking it up so quickly despite being so young.

(Sorry, but I'm at least 10 times older than my 3 year old exterior suggests.)

Herscherik experienced a feeling of inexplicable guilt and apologized in his head.

Next came arithmetic.

This world's arithmetic was barely any different, resembling the decimal system but with different symbols, and so he easily picked it up as well. Or rather, considering he worked as an office clerk in his previous life, simple mental calculations were a cinch. He was praised for this just like with his language study, and Herscherik once again apologized inside his head. For some reason, he couldn't endure it.

Here, he suddenly found something dubious. For some reason, although the letters were different, the words sounded like Japanese.

He thought it was strange, but he recalled that he had obtained an ego when he was roughly a year old. This was only a conjecture, but listening to the conversations around him might have unconsciously made him remember this language as the one

he was familiar with.

(I had thought that it was Japanese, but it was actually this world's language, huh)

It's like when someone in Japan can speak Japanese before they're aware that they can. Same with English in English-speaking countries and French in French-speaking countries. In other words, it can be said that these words have been ingrained in him as he has been constantly listening to them ever since he had been born into this world, but his memories made him think it was Japanese.

Anyways, while he could not remember when his previous self started speaking Japanese like that, he decided to be satisfied with such an explanation.

(Like how I wanted to be an American during my English lessons in my previous life.)

Herscherik has been doing very well up until now.

With the appearance of a 3 year-old child, and the interior of a 34 year-old member of society on the verge of being an old lady, he already had the methods and know-how for studying. This was all the result of his past life experiences, equivalent to him gaining the qualifications for employment and society in one go. After all, his lessons right now would be at the level of an elementary school curriculum in Japan.

But now, dark clouds were hanging overhead.

"It's a shame, but....."

The teacher apologized. By no means had he done something wrong; in fact, the fault lied with Herscherik.

"For Your Highness, magic is a foundational necessity. But it seems like you do not have any magical power."

(.....To think I didn't have any magical power! AAAAH!!!!)

The moment the teacher said those words, Herscherik's mind went blank, and screams rang in his head. While this didn't show on his face, the unrest inside of him was intense.

The power of a ruler as shown in manga and games: magic.

In his past life, a fantasy element like magic was something only a child constantly thought of and craved, but..... although only his outer appearance was that of a 3 year-old, Herscherik was honestly looking forward to it.

But reality was harsh.

He tested his magic by simply making a flame to light a lamp, but nothing happened.

“This is a really rare case.....”

According to the magic teacher, all humans have some amount of magic dwelling inside their bodies.

Lighting a lamp is something anyone with any level of magical power could do, so this would make it the first time the magic teacher had seen a human without any magical power.

“His Majesty had originally intended to become a scholar, but considering he also had talent for magic...”

There’s no way that his child would not be able to use magic, is what he implied.

He had heard that the other princes and princesses also excelled in magic and were all rated first-class.

Is it possible that he isn’t his father’s son? Similar thoughts filled Herscherik’s mind, and so he visited his busy father’s private room that night, looking depressed.

“Well, your mother was also a rare case of having no magic. Hersche, we look so alike, of course you’re my child.”

His father said unconcernedly as he patted Herscherik’s head.

(Mother, I’m sorry for thinking you had an affair.)

In his head, he did a sliding dogeza ¹ to the mother he had never met.

(But, in reincarnation manga and novels, the reincarnated usually gets some immense magical powers and stuff, right?)

The protagonists in the stories that he read in his past life had magical power that was levels above any normal person. And their setting would be such that they would send

the villains flying with fire or such.

(Nah, even if I could do that, I wouldn't.)

In any case, if his opponents were the type he could end with just one flying hit, he wouldn't be suffering this much. Moreover, Herscherik felt that you couldn't really call it a resolution if the result was simply a show of brute power. Regardless, the fact that he couldn't use the fantastical element of magic was disheartening.

After receiving such a shocking revelation about his lack of magical power, another core component of the many fantasy stories that Herscherik... no, Ryouko... happily read, was destroyed.

"I wouldn't want to call Your Highness ordinary, but how shall I put it....."

Just like his magic teacher, his teacher from the Order of Knights apologized as well. After retiring from military service, the teacher was tasked with training all the troops in the Order of Knights and the army. As such, he was proficient at assessing his trainee's potential.

The teacher was initially hesitant to say, but after resolving himself, he looked at Herscherik and spoke frankly.

"Your Highness, I apologize for this. I will speak honestly. Your Highness has not the talent for fencing nor for horsemanship."

Herscherik understood that this was the kindest way perceivers of talent could make someone lose their futile hope.

According to the teacher, if Herscherik worked hard enough, he may one day be able to handle the sword and horse like everyone else, but he should not hold onto the hope of becoming first-rate.

"Although His Majesty was excellent in magic, he also excelled in swordsmanship. As such....."

Herscherik recalled having heard similar words before. But this time, he decided that he wouldn't charge into his father's room.

(.....I mean, that gentle father is surprisingly high-spec.)

His father and his kind smile came to mind. Frankly, Herscherik couldn't imagine his father firing off magic or fighting with a sword.

At any rate, he couldn't depend on using swordsmanship or horsemanship in order to protect himself, but that just spoke to how difficult his path would be.

(I know that I had pretty slow reflexes in my past life, but.....)

Herscherik sat on the sofa in his room, exhausted.

Who would've thought that his protagonist flag would keep breaking! He had thought this before, but it seems like he was the disappointing child among the princes. If this were an otome game, he'd be the character that the player would put off to the end and then just use a strategy guide for the sake of completing the game.

(But I don't have the luxury to be depressed.)

There's no helping what he cannot do. Instead, Herscherik thought of what he could do.

He took out a book he had borrowed from the inner palace library that was only accessible to the royal family. Though, it would be more fitting to call it a picture book. The letters were large and there were many illustrations. It was a book that was easy to understand.

(First I have to make sure I can actually read the words.)

Ryouko wasn't good at English, but she did like to read books. Whenever there was a book she was interested in, she would hold back bitter tears because it wasn't translated into Japanese.

(In the past, I didn't have any free time since I was working, but now that I'm a child, I've got plenty of time.)

He would read a large amount of books and learn the words, as well as get a grasp on the numerical characters. His experiences from his past life told him that the best way to grow was to put everything to practice.

Since that day, Herscherik continued to take lessons from his teachers while spending a majority of each day by his window, reading books on the sofa. The moment he didn't

understand something, he would ask either his teachers or Meria. As such, Herscherik's language ability gradually increased.

He would read whenever he got a chance, and doing so for half a year resulted in a level of growth where he could read even those difficult-to-understand technical books.

(And now, it looks like it's finally time for our nightly candid news report.)

Herscherik held the pocket watch like a microphone and, in his head, spoke like one of those announcers he saw on TV in his past life.

Half a year had passed since he began studying, and Herscherik finally understood enough of this world's language to take the next step.

(Today, we'll be looking at a cornerstone of our nation: the 1st room of the Headquarters of the Finance Bureau!)

He certainly wasn't talking like a variety narrator because he was scared of the castle at night.

It also wasn't because he learned from books that evil spirits existed in this world.....
Definitely not for those reasons.

(But it really is very dark...)

He looked at his surroundings.

He had been desperate when he had went out to meet the count so he hadn't noticed, but moonlight was the only thing illuminating the royal castle hallways.

In his previous world, electricity was the major source of energy, so even the night was bright.

But in this world, electricity doesn't exist. Instead, wandering magical power exists.

Herscherik didn't have any magical power, but he did learn the fundamental knowledge needed for magic without actually being able to use it. And among those lessons, he learned about wandering magical power.

This world's magical power exists in two forms: magical power that people hold and magical power that drifts in the air.

Just like in a game, people's magical power is measured in magical points. If one uses it, MP is consumed, and if one rests, it is restored. There are differences among individuals, and through training, everyone can increase their maximum amount.

(Though that would be impossible for someone with an initial value of nothing...)

Just as 0 times 100 is still 0, no amount of training could be meaningful to Herscherik with his non-existent MP.

The magical power that drifts in the air is called wandering magical power, which is the generic term for the magical power produced by the earth, seas, rivers, trees, and etc. Just as a tree produces oxygen through photosynthesis, it also produces magical power.

And this wandering magical power is the light energy that illuminates the street lights and rooms, the thermal energy that boils the water, the cooling energy that keeps refrigerators and such cold, and the mechanical energy that is used in the aqueducts. Resembling a type of floating electricity, there are many expectations for research into finding the method to wring out the ambient energy from the air.

(It's a very eco-friendly energy, right? Since it came from nature, it won't pollute nature.)

In this world, there were no protestations of environmental destruction like in his previous life's world, although it could also be said that this world's technology wasn't advanced enough to cause such destruction.

(Well, it looks like I've finally reached it. This is the Finance Bureau's first room.....)

Herscherik looked up at the heavy wooden door. There was the door plate that said "1st Room of the Headquarter of the Finance Bureau".

Herscherik pressed his tiny body against the door in an effort to move it. A majority of the doors in this castle were push-to-open doors, so even a young child like himself could open them. They were equipped with locks, but luckily for Herscherik, they were left open tonight. It could be due to the negligence of the Bureau's manager, or maybe they were unlocked for the night guard to make his rounds. Either way, Herscherik

was able to easily trespass into the room.

“Geh.....”

Herscherik reflexively frowned the moment he entered. In front of him was a very disorderly room.

There were probably at least 10 people who used this room, and on top of each of their desks was a mountain of jumbled documents. Further in, there was a door that said ‘Data Room’, along with a few others, each with their own door plate reading ‘Bureau Director’s Room’, ‘Conference Room’, and so on.

“With this mess, they probably can’t even work...”

Probably due to his past as an office worker, Herscherik unconsciously mumbled in an astonished tone.

When he worked in his past life, Ryouko’s desk was neatly organized from the data in her computer to the files on her desk. That was because she understood that cleanliness was tied to efficient work.

However, in this place, the workers should be more worried about the fact that they wouldn’t even know if they lost any documents, let alone their efficiency working in this state.

Even if someone stole their files, it was likely no one would notice. Was it really alright for the bureau in charge of the whole country’s finances to be in such a state?

“...But it’s better for me this way.”

Even if he were to slightly change the placement of the documents or if any of them were to disappear, it would be difficult to pin the action on him: a small blessing for Herscherik as he snuck inside.

“And now, I shall begin the internal audit.”

Herscherik remembered his previous life.

In the past, Ryouko served in the main office and worked as somewhat of an auditor for the branch offices. *Legally speaking, has the branch office done anything using their own judgement, that requires some approval from the main office? Did they properly record all income and expenditures? Did they collect all proceeds? Did they collect*

payments without any problems? She investigated all questionable areas with a level of persistence that a pestering mother-in-law would use for in relation to her daughter-in-law's cleaning.

Because her thorough investigations struck fear into the hearts of the branch officers, she was nicknamed "Honorable Mother-in-Law Ryou, the Auditor from the Main Office".

To Ryouko who didn't even have a boyfriend, let alone a husband, this nickname of mother-in-law was very far off. Furthermore, if there were no problems then Ryouko wouldn't have been that nickpicky about them. It's just that she did her work seriously and even gave advice and support. Despite being a regular office worker, she earned fervent trust from the branch workers to the area leaders and the branch managers, and even from those inside the main office. Though the person receiving this trust didn't know about that at all.

For the time being, Herscherik picked up a document from one of the less chaotic desks.

"Hum, yup. It's dark....."

He tried to read the letters, but it was too dark to see easily. He walked towards the window, and the moonlight shone on the paper, making the words legible.

(Uhhh... a name of a product? Is this the name of a foodstuff?)

Apparently, that document was a list of ingredients heading for the castle. Next to the name of the food, there was a list containing the production location, harvest period, and cost.

"Hmph, this is troubling. I'm not sure if these are reasonable prices or not."

Although there were numerous values listed, he didn't know if they were considered expensive or cheap... The fact that he didn't know such a basic knowledge hurt him.

Of course, he had completed the lesson on currency.

This world's currency is copper coins, silver coins, gold coins, and platinum coins. 100 copper coins are worth 1 silver coin and 100 silver coins are 1 gold coin. Finally, 100

gold coins are equivalent to 1 platinum coin.

However, when the amount of money increases, it becomes a bit too much to carry, in which case a small, check-like object called a bond can be used instead. But to use this security, one needs approval from a legal office.

But Herscherik couldn't figure out how much each denomination of currency was worth in this world and how much could be exchanged for them, so he could only scratch his head

".....At any rate, guess I'll just randomly search around."

Numbers do not lie. If they ever were to tell a lie, it was only because of a hole somewhere else. Telling the difference is what determines whether one is clever or not.

Herscherik repeatedly pulled out documents from the mountain and read them by the window in silence.

Herscherik rubbed his eyes. He wondered how much time had passed, opened the pocket watch, and saw that it was already quite late into the night.

In his past life, his body was more or less used to staying up late, but it seems that it was impossible for his current, childish, body. The fatigue in his eyes grew very quickly, possibly due to him reading by the moonlight.

"I really do want some light."

While thinking about stealing a lamp from somewhere next time, he played around with the pocket watch.

"It would've been better if I could at least use enough magic to get some light."

If he could do so, then he wouldn't have to suffer reading under the unreliable moonbeams.

He recalled his first lesson as he hummed the incantation. It was a little different than normal words.

If Japanese was the spoken language, then the incantation would be like English. In order to use magic, one needs to invoke the technical words known as magical

words like a switch. As such, in order to use magic, knowledge and skill with magical words were more important than magical power.

High ranking magicians can easily use magic without having to use these magical words, with magician being a general term for those who can use magic.

But even after Herscherik finished reciting the magical words, nothing around him changed. As expected of someone without any magical power.

“Just kidding.”

A little discouraged, Herscherik decided to return back to his room. But as he stood up, something abnormal happened to his body.

A sensation that resembled a trembling chill ran through his right hand and, all of a sudden, a white ball of light appeared right before his eyes.

“Gyaa.....!”

Herscherik was about to scream at the sudden ball of light, but he quickly covered his mouth in a panic.

He was supposed to be moving like a ninja. If he were to make a racket, then all his hard work would go to waste.

Because he reflexively covered his mouth, he ended up dropping the pocket watch. The moment it hit the floor, the watch let out a high-pitched sound and the ball of light disappeared.

“.....Huh?”

A question mark appeared in Herscherik’s head as he picked up the fallen pocket watch.

It was very faint, but he felt like the beautiful, old silver watch had given off a faint glow when the white ball of light appeared.

“Hmm.”

He once again recited the magical words. After feeling the trembling sensation again, the ball of light appeared once more.

While holding the pocket watch, he slowly moved away from the light. After which he imagined turning off the light, and the ball of light disappeared without a sound.

He let go of the pocket watch and cast the spell once again. But neither the feeling nor ball of light appeared.

There was only one hypothesis he could think of.

This pocket watch had somehow collected the wandering magical power, responded to his magical words, and invoked the spell for light.

(A surprisingly convenient item!)

Although it was a magic that lit a small light, it was still magic. And that trembling feeling must be the sensation of using magic.

(And since I'm utilizing wandering magical power, I don't get tired!)

This elation was like when one gets their hands on a newly-released game. ***This is a fantasy world!*** Herscherik cheered inside his head.

Herscherik returned to his room, and the very next day, he tried to use a different magic with the watch. But the pocket watch was silent. Well, it's a pocket watch, so of course it doesn't speak.

The result of his tests was that by absorbing a tiny amount of wandering magic in his surroundings and utilizing them, Herscherik could use only trivial magic like creating that light ball or lighting up a candle.

(This is like the despair you get when that newly-released game you reserved and waited so long for turns out to be an utter failure.....)

Herscherik hung his head. Well, at least he can now read documents at night, preventing the darkness from ruining his eyesight.



On this night, the Greisis Kingdom's castle was ruled by darkness.

The evening moon was hidden behind clouds and the darkness outside seeped into the castle, obscuring everything. An intruder snuck in, completely suppressing his

presence. He easily avoided the night watch and silently entered the target's room.

This intruder worked as a spy for the illegal underground guild.

Not possessing any particular master, this spy would fulfill his employer's contract within the deadline in exchange for a high price—very convenient for those of shady backgrounds who want something done quietly.

The contents of his jobs include: gathering information on opposing parties, searching for incriminating evidence, and sometimes even assassination. All the jobs that come to him were certainly illegal and tricky, but he always completed his job.

'Shadow Fang'

The intruder didn't have a name nor did he give one out. As such, those around him gave him the name, out of fear.

He was a 'shadow' who silently draws near and by the time his victim notices him, it's too late to stop the 'fang' from cutting into their neck.

But not everyone could hire him. That's because the cost of hiring from the underground guild grows in proportion to the request taker's abilities.

In order to hire someone powerful enough to earn such a nickname, a befitting settlement was required. The price was even higher considering he had, through his great abilities, gained the right to choose his jobs.

This time his task was to retrieve the report submitted by a certain aristocrat to the royal castle. The aristocrat had mixed up the document that he meant to give in place of the one that he wanted to hide. As such, this job could only be described as "cleaning up an idiot's mess".

Just infiltrating this place was already quite troublesome. This was the royal castle of an imperial power. The guards weren't as lax as those in other aristocrats' manors, and first-rate barriers were employed everywhere. The invader carried such a nickname for a reason, so infiltrating this place was possible for him; but if he could, he would prefer to stay away from here.

(Tch, I chose the wrong job.)

The intruder clicked his tongue inside his head.

The job he was introduced to in the guild didn't seem that difficult. Besides, the compensation was large when compared to the job's contents, and considering the fact that he needed money to pay for some expenses, he decided to accept the job. But after he signed the contract, his employer declared that the place he would be infiltrating would be the royal castle.

(That's why no one else accepted, despite such a large reward.)

The intruder felt the saying "The most appealing stories always have a catch" seeped deep inside of his mind. He later heard from the guild receptionist that that aristocrat has repeatedly done the same thing again and again, resulting in hatred towards him from all the underground members.

They all grumbled, telling that he shouldn't have accepted such a job.

"But like, the guild's mediation charge is also a lot, hum~."

He replied, in a manner atypical of an underground guild member.

His trait of not socializing with people, also backfired on him. If he had any comrades, he might have gotten some warning from them; either way it was already too late.

But even if there was foul play involved, it could be detrimental to his future jobs if he ripped up a contract he had previously accepted. It may be illegal, but it was paid work, and getting that work depended on his credibility.

Therefore, he infiltrated the royal castle despite his aggravation, hastening toward his target. He looked around the room.

(According to the information, this should be the room with my objective..... but what the heck is with this place?)

The room was large and probably occupiable by around 20 people. But practically all the desks were covered in piles of documents, making the room feel oppressive and narrow. Searching for the intended document in this mess will probably require a considerable amount of effort.

For the time being, he headed towards the seat belonging to the one with the highest

position.

This was probably the department head's seat and hopefully from that, he could grasp the distribution of work in the room. He thought it would make his job faster to first get a lay of the land.

Compared to the other desks, this one was orderly and made with the highest quality. He began to search through the documents on top of the desk, seeming all too familiar with the process.

Bump He heard a noise.

The sound surprised the man, and he stopped moving. He drew his hidden knife and looked around his surroundings.

But there was no one around. He remained the only being in this dark space surrounded by mountains of documents.

(...Was it my imagination?)

Thinking so, he put away his weapon. He was about to stretch his hand out for another document, but he halted all movement.

His gaze was met by a face that was situated underneath the desk he was about to rummage through.

"Uhhh..... good evening?"

An idiotic and childish voice echoed through the room.

The owner of the voice tilted his head up at the intruder with an embarrassed look on his face.

It was Herscherik, who had been crouching underneath the desk to avoid being discovered. He was challenging the mountain of documents again this evening, this time with a light.

One month had already passed since he had started his, unofficial, internal audit. He had just begun to grasp the structure and rankings in the organisation and the distribution of its jobs. Because he was too engrossed by the documents, he didn't even notice the intruder until he heard the sound of rustling overhead... in other words, not until there was noise on top of the desk directly above him.

Nevertheless, he was the only one who came to this place around this time, and so he was expecting to be alone. And since the intruder was that silent, what can't be helped can't be helped.

(He's probably not a person from this castle. Since he's fully dressed in black and all.....)

Herscherik looked at the person and his pure black clothes that seemed to make him disappear into the night. He was also covering his mouth with a black cloth and had on a black hood. The only thing one could see of him were his eyes.

In this night with the moon obscured by clouds, his eyes, illuminated by the faint light, looked dark. However, on closer inspection, they were red like blood. Herscherik could clearly see how those eyes froze at this unexpected situation.

Even Herscherik would freeze if he saw a random child come out from under a desk.

"Um, is me being here bad?"

Herscherik asked as he looked at his pocket watch. It was almost time for the night guard to arrive.

While he was checking the time, he heard footsteps getting closer. He also saw the eyes of the man in front of him become flustered.

Herscherik hesitated but only for a moment.

He quickly returned the pile of documents he had been reading from, back to the desk. He then slipped past the intruder and headed towards the hallway.

The intruder saw Herscherik start to leave and returned to his senses. Normally, he would be able to handle such a situation, but the unexpectedness of it slowed down his brain and caused him to let his guard down.

He knew it would be bad if soldiers were called, so he tried to capture the boy. However, because his movements were slow due to the shock, Herscherik had already rushed out into the hallway.

(.....Including the child, should I get rid of the patrol?)

Killing a random child unconnected to his job would leave a bad taste in his mouth, but it couldn't be helped. With a nimble flick of the wrists, the intruder had his knives clasped in his hands.

He peeked out the door into the hallway. Thereupon, he saw the child and soldier conversing in the middle of the path. Or rather, he saw the guard scolding the child.

"Your Highness Herscherik, how many times must I tell you to stop having these 'tests of courage'!"

"I... I'm sorry~!"

The child, addressed by the guard as 'Your Highness', was bowing his head in apology. Even though the soldier was only a retainer, he scolded the child as if the boy was his own. The intruder froze again, witnessing yet another bizarre scene.

"Well now! I will escort you back tonight, so please, let us go. And the next time I find you out here in the middle of the night, I'll report this to His Majesty, do you understand?"

"Understood! I'll make sure that you don't find me next time!"

"Your Highness Herscherik..... good grief."

The soldier let out a sigh and led the child away. His tone was like that of a father, and although his facial expression couldn't be seen, there was no doubt from his air of resignation, that his laugh was a strained one.

Herscherik observed the soldier in front of him before turning around. He lightly waved his hand and smiled at the intruder who had been waiting and watching from inside the room. Then, Herscherik ran up to the soldier and nonchalantly began chatting with him in a jovial manner. With that, the soldier left, completely unaware of the intruder in the room behind him.

The intruder was frozen stiff with each unexpected scenario piling on top of each other. All he could do was watch the night guard and the prince walk away. While unsatisfied by his lack of progress, he was forced to retreat.

Herscherik—the 7th Prince, the youngest prince of the Greisis Kingdom, for whom the king had the most affection.

At the banquet in the beginning of spring to celebrate his 3rd birthday, it was discovered that a certain count had been committing treason towards the nation. This had gone public, becoming a common topic of discussion within the country.

Herscherik's name was introduced to the public only twice: through the announcement of his birthday and through that incident. Though, the citizens didn't pay much attention to the news. This was already the 7th time that they had celebrated a prince's birthday. And if one were to add to that number the celebrations for the princesses, one would run out of fingers with which to count. Furthermore, news about the country's corruption was an everyday occurrence. Rather than worrying about such distant problems, the citizens were more concerned with how they were going to live through their tomorrow.

When the intruder learned about that story the next day, he was full of confusion.

"That was the prince?"

(But why was he was sneaking around in the middle of the night to look at a bunch of documents?)

The intruder's answer appeared before him that night.

"Good evening, umm, Mr. Intruder?"

When he infiltrated the palace again and returned to the same room, he found the boy sitting and waiting by the window. Unlike last time, moonbeams illuminated the room. His blonde hair looked magical in the light, and his blue eyes gave off an even more fantastical air.

The intruder didn't sense any hostility in those eyes, but the scene itself was still as bizarre and unrealistic as before, due to the young prince's presence here in the middle of the night.

The intruder instinctively drew his knives, but Herscherik panicked and waved his hands in front of him, showing that he held no ill will.

"Wa-wait a sec! There's no one else here besides me. By the way, the night guard won't come here until about an hour from now."

".....What do you want?"

The intruder spoke vigilantly, in a low voice.

Herscherik took this as a sign that the man was willing to listen, and felt relieved.

“I have something I want to ask you.”

Hercherik said as he held out a document. Without lowering his knives, the intruder peered at the page. On it was a list of food and furniture, purchased for use in the castle.

The intruder tilted his head in puzzlement, and Herscherik asked with a serious face.

“Are the costs of these expensive? Or are they cheap?”

The strangeness of the question paralyzed the intruder’s mind such that he answered without thinking.

“It’s three times greater than the lowest price.”

(They have quality, but it’s a bit of a rip-off.)

When he didn’t have work, he would mingle with and live among the ordinary folk. He even went out to the marketplace on occasion. The prices listed on that document would make anyone’s eyebrows knit in bewilderment.

Herscherik expected such an answer, letting out a sigh and scratching his head.

“That’s what I thought..... though it somewhat can’t be helped.”

Herscherik had begun to mumble to himself. He let out another sigh and faced the intruder.

“Thanks. The people in the castle wouldn’t tell me, so you were helpful. Ah, I’m Herscherik. Your name is?”

“.....Don’t have one.”

The intruder answered. Later on, he wondered why he had answered so obediently. It’s just that, in that situation, he found neither hostility nor anything to fear. He found it ridiculous to be wary of Herscherik, who smiled and addressed him like an old

friend.

“.....Then I'll call you Mr. Kuro, alright?”

That was the name of Ryouko's family's dog. It was a large, black dog, with a scary face, and it made all the neighborhood kids cry. But in reality, it was a friendly creature that hardly ever barked at people. When Herscherik saw the intruder's figure, fully dressed in black, he was reminded of his beloved dog, Kuro.

“Mr. Kuro, why are you here? Since you helped me, I want to thank you.”

“Oi, I'm more or less an intruder, you know.”

Kuro—the intruder couldn't understand why he was being addressed so casually. Herscherik sensed Kuro's feelings and grumbled while looking up at the ceiling.

“Aah, when you infiltrated the castle, I knew that you were quite the skilled person. Plus, if you were after my life, you probably would've finished your job last time. As I'm not dead yet, this means you have another motive, right?”

(If he was serious, my head would've been sent flying.)

Herscherik was aware that his own combative abilities were practically nonexistent. Nevertheless, he needed someone who knew what was going on outside.

Even though he asked Meria, she wouldn't give him an answer.

His father was busy, so he didn't want to bother him. All the other princess consorts were celebrities so he was hesitant to ask them questions.

In addition if he, a 3 year-old, asked, it was doubtful that they would properly answer him.

“That's why I'll help you. I value my life, and if I quickly give you what you want, you'll quickly leave; that's my true intention.”

Herscherik said and smiled wide. It was meant to be refreshing smile, but to Kuro, it looked bold.

But an underground person would use anything he can use.

Kuro disclosed the details of his task, the kind of report he was looking for and when it was submitted, without revealing his employer. When he finished, Herscherik

thought for a couple of seconds then pointed towards a pile of documents on one of the desks.

“Aah, it could be in that pile over there. There’s a bunch of uncompleted documents.”

At those words, Kuro fished through the bundle of documents, half convinced and half doubtful. But just as the boy had said, he was able to find his target.

“That’s it, right? There was a bunch of strange numbers on the report, so it bothered me, but you wanted to replace it, correct?”

To Kuro, it sounded like Herscherik had already checked the contents of the document. This caused Kuro’s intense gaze to fall on him, but the boy merely shrugged his shoulders.

Kuro later learned that this prince had actually checked it and decided to hand it over like an adult. In fact, if the boy didn’t know about the document, he probably would have tried to buy some time. He definitely would have tried to deceive Kuro and press him about the correct document, depending on the seriousness of its contents.

These thoughts vaguely ran through Kuro’s mind. He looked on with doubtful eyes, and Herscherik smiled sweetly and went on.

“I won’t tell anyone, so don’t worry. Even if a tiny kid like me were to say something, no one would bother to listen..... well, at least for now, heh.”

That definitely wasn’t a smile that belonged to a child.

Later, Kuro slapped the document in his client’s face and fulfilled his contract. Still, the reputation of his skill grew and he frequently began to accept requests to infiltrate the royal castle.

Kuro had thought that he never wanted to do such a thing again, but in the end he was intrigued by that prince. Each time he infiltrated the castle, he encountered the prince in places you would least expect to find a child.

Chapter 5

Kuro, Secret path, and Castle town

“Ah, good evening, Mr. Kuro.”

The 7th prince of the Greisis Kingdom, Herscherik, had become 4 years old this spring. And yet, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he addressed the intruder with great familiarity, like he would a friend.

He spoke like he was calling out to an old companion, who he had just coincidentally run into. However, this casual meeting just so happened to be at midnight, in an armory belonging to the Order of Knights.

“Thank you for your hard work this late at night~”

Herscherik gave a quick bow to the intruder and went right back to his own work.

(I had completely thought that no one else would be here though.....)

A half a year had passed since the meeting between the prince and the intruder, whom the prince had arbitrarily named ‘Kuro’. With the quick growth of a child, Herscherik’s height had increased, and the immaturity was gradually leaving his face.

Why was the intruder so interested in this prince’s growth? It was because Kuro had been taking requests to infiltrate the royal castle for almost half a year. For one, he accepted a request to gather information. For another, he was to recover proof of a certain aristocrat’s forgery. He received such jobs from the underground guild and snuck into the royal castle night after night. Incidentally, his task this time was to deliver a certain lady’s letter to someone in the castle, with whom she was having an affair. As this lover of hers was a knight, he infiltrated the dormitory, which doubled as a storehouse, and was next to the Military Bureau.

But he had sensed a unexpected presence in the area, and peeked inside the armory. There, he saw a tiny shadow, darting about. The only one in this castle he could imagine doing such a thing had to be the one he met in that night: the 7th prince.

In any case, the intruder headed to the knight's room and inserted the letter into the gap under the door. It was likely that, in the morning, the letter would turn the lover pale-faced, but that was no concern of Kuro's. When he returned to the armory, he found the prince having a staring contest with a note, with a serious look on his face.

(Recently, it's no longer a surprise to me that I keep finding the prince in these places...)

One time, he was found skulking about the Military Bureau Director's private room; the next, he was inside a document cabinet in the Financial Bureau. Another time was in the royal castle's food storehouse..... Even the intruder, Kuro, who preferred to wander through neglected areas, found this to be weird. They were all locations so strange and out of the way, that meeting someone there, even by chance, would surprise anyone. Not to mention, Kuro would bump into the child at times and places generally unoccupied by young kids. As a result, such encounters became the norm for him.

Kuro took a peek to see what was on today's agenda, and it appeared that the prince was investigating the armory inventory. Herscherik was checking off items from his handmade note, but it seemed that not all of them were accounted for, causing him to knit his eyebrows.

"As expected, they don't match..... It could just be a late delivery. Or was it falsified?"
"What's wrong?"

Kuro called out from behind the prince, who was wracking his brain over the issue. Herscherik looked up at Kuro, not the least bit surprised.

"Mr. Kuro, is your work done? Just to make sure, it's not something bad for the country, right?"

"Yeah. Well, it's pretty bad for the receiver, heh."

To a lover in an illicit affair, a letter demanding an offer of marriage was probably the worst. He was a knight who laid his hands on a married woman. Unless he resolved this matter, his future as a knight was over.

"Well, that's fine then."

Unless the action would negatively affect the country, his father, or the rest of his family, Herscherik wasn't particularly concerned. Moreover, he didn't think Kuro would easily answer him, if such was the case.

Besides, there was hardly any fallout from Kuro's contracted work during this half year. And since this was Kuro's livelihood, Herscherik had no means of stopping him.

Herscherik quickly lost interest in the topic and decided to ask Kuro for clarification on his current problem.

"Mr. Kuro, can you tell me a little about this? It's doesn't matter if it's just in general, but does the delivery of weapons and equipment take some time?"

"Depends on the object. The stuff the Order of Knights and army use are, to a certain extent, of a higher quality, so there are times when the delivery takes longer."

".....Even 4 months?"

Kuro answered the prince's question with silence.

For the delivery to be that slow, it was certainly strange. That thought slipped out through Kuro's silence.

Herscherik took the silence as an affirmation of his doubts.

"Even though the payments have been settled, the delivery is non-existent. There were also no traces of them being used....."

(No matter how you look at it, this is a falsified transaction. Really, thank you so much.)

Herscherik was exhausted. The closer he looked, the more he found; pieces of overpaid invoices and incomplete requests were constantly uncovered, piling up like a mountain.

(If this was an ordinary business, we would've long since gone bankrupt.....)

Though, this may not seem like a problem to the Finance Bureau, as taxes and the national treasury were still exceeding projections. No, there's also the possibility that the Finance Bureau was purposely overlooking these inconsistencies. They were probably fine with the situation so long as they were receiving the tax money.

In this half of a year, Herscherik had conducted his "Charge In ☆ It's an Unofficial Internal Audit¹" in each of the bureaus. His conclusions were that each bureau was

hiding questionable parts, to some extent.

But that was a conclusion based only on the intuition, experience, and abilities of an office worker in his previous world, that he had cultivated while he was Ryouko.

(In this world, I lack too much experience and information.)

Perhaps what he found to be questionable could actually be quite ordinary here. In addition, there might also be superfluous positions that would make anyone ask, “Is that necessary? It’s pointless, you know,” in any other workplace.

That’s why he concluded that he must quickly bridge this knowledge disparity.

“Mr. Kuro, I have a favor I want to ask.”

“What.....?”

(To me, the most important thing in this world that I need right now, is experience and knowledge. That’s why it’s about time I move on to the next stage.)

Herscherik looked up at Kuro with his head tilted to the side. That gesture, paired with his smile, was truly very cute.

This was the first time he had visited the castle town, and it seemed to be flourishing, with many people all around. Stores were scattered here and there, selling their wares, and cheerful voices echoed out, inviting customers.

(This is the castle town!)

Herscherik gawked around like a tourist.

He had Meria make him some clothes that he could get dirty, and they were bit more modest than the ones he usually wore. He hid his face with the hood attached to a poncho-like cloak. No matter how one looked at it, he didn’t seem like one of the children from the town, but it would be a stretch to assume that he was some young master from a rich family.

The other day, Herscherik asked Kuro to show him a secret path that would lead to the castle town...

No matter how skilled of a spy Kuro was, there was no way he could easily go to and from the royal castle, that supposedly had a barrier erected, directly. As such, Herscherik suspected that he must know of some secret and, hopefully, safe route. Herscherik pressed Kuro with a flurry of words to try to blackmail... er rather, persuade him.

“The first time we met, I saved you, you know?”

“.....No, the information I supplied you with later on made up for that.”

“But I also showed you where the document was, right? If I didn’t point that out to you, you would’ve taken much longer to find it, right?”

In the end, Kuro raised up the white flag. He knew that, regardless of the rejections or complaints he gave, Herscherik wouldn’t give up. As such, he informed the prince about the several cracks in the barrier that one could go in and out from, and the one Herscherik should take.

It was behind the building that housed the laboratory and archives. That area was now hidden by trees, and there was a waterway that was no longer in operation. It was an unmaintained place where no one thought to go. The crack was as tall and wide as a child standing upright or an adult bending over, and either could pass through as such. There were a pair of iron bars placed over the entrance, but as Herscherik rotated a spot as Kuro had instructed, the iron bars moved, allowing Herscherik to pass through. The waterway was dried up and had been neglected for several decades. There was no dampness, and the smell barely bothered him at all. And when he again rotated another spot on the iron bars on the other side, he was able to leave the premise. The area in front of the exit was also behind trees, making it unnoticeable.

(Everything should be fine since I don’t have afternoon classes, and I told Meria that I was going to the library.)

While thinking of excuses, such as he was playing hide-and-seek or had a secret hideout, in case he was discovered, Herscherik took his first step out of the castle.

(The prices are cheaper compared to Japan.....?)

Herscherik compared the values written on the price tags to the ones in his previous world.

Take the sale of this red fruit for instance. It was called an apple in his previous life and was 10 copper coins in this world. Then, he went to what looked like a discount

clothing store, and all the clothes there were 50 copper coins. If he assumed that 1 copper coin was equivalent to about 10 yen, then a 100 yen apple could be considered to be quite a bargain.

(But the ones stored in the castle were 50 copper coins apiece. That's 5 times the market price. That price inflation is way too unnatural.)

Did this strange surplus end up disappearing inside someone's pocket?
Herscherik sank into the abyss of his thoughts when a piercing sound reverberated through the marketplace.

"Hey, this again?"

"Yeah, looks like the folks from the Patrol Bureau are making more false charges."

The owner of the general store right next to Herscherik asked a passerby.

"The Patrol Bureau and the commercial guild are fighting now. I feel bad for that fruit seller..... They say her husband isn't here today, which is why they're ganging up on-....."

Ignoring the rest of the conversation, Herscherik jogged towards the center of the turbulent crowd.

With his tiny body he easily maneuvered around the wall of people and popped out near the stalls. Just as he did, a red fruit was thrown onto the ground in front of him.

"PLEASE STOP!!!!"

A scream echoed out.

It had come from a healthy and attractive woman, roughly in her mid-thirties. From the look of her sunburnt skin and the well-muscled arms extending from her sleeves, she seemed like a hard worker. But there were still visible traces of a feminine charm; it was a beauty very different to those of his father's consorts.

But this woman was now surrounded by three officers from the Patrol Bureau, and her face warped into a pained expression.

"But you know, ma'am. You cannot cross over and place your goods beyond the established boundary."

“I didn’t leave them there!”

“But we saw them left there.”

“Those are just your words! Where’s the proof that they were left there!?”

The three men snickered at her words.

“Then conversely, can you give us proof that they weren’t left there? In that case, it’ll be better if we got a third-party to weigh in. Is there anyone here with proof that she didn’t cross over the line?”

The officers from the Patrol Bureau looked around the area, but curious onlookers who had previously gathered around, turned away, avoiding eye contact. There was no one who volunteered themselves. No one wanted to get involved.

(Alas, how pitifully cliché...)

Herscherik sighed softly. He didn’t expect the commotion to be something so easy to understand. It was like a third rate play from his past life, one that sickened him.

The Patrol Bureau was in charge of maintaining public order within the country. If this was Japan, they would be called police officers.

Their primary job was to protect the citizens, so to see such stupid behavior from them, wouldn’t cause only Herscherik to let out a sigh.

Maybe the surrounding people didn’t want any trouble, but it was becoming obvious that they weren’t planning to help. Even though they all seemed sympathetic, in truth they didn’t want to be connected with this absurdity in any way.

“If you wanna resolve this amicably, you can give the full details of it at the Bureau, ya know? Well, that’s if you show us some... ‘sincerity’..... heh heh.”

(Asking for even more bribes...)

Herscherik was at his wit’s end, looking at the corruption of government officials right before his eyes. If these men, who were supposed to be the most concerned about the lives of the citizens, acted in this manner when under the employment of the monarchy, then how must the royal family be regarded? Even trying to imagine it was dreadful.

He put on a face like that of an employee at a prestigious company. It could be said that it was like the one he would use in his past life's workplace. The impression a customer or contractor had of a company was influenced by the actions of their employees, and those actions were a facilitator for trust and profit directed to the organisation. The opposite was true as well. The actions of a company also affected the conduct and impressions of the employee.

To one extreme, this also applied to a country's government officials. How could a country hope to gain the trust of their citizens, when their own employees acted in such a way towards their people.

Moreover, Herscherik wasn't an apathetic and dispassionate person; he had always hated the people who did such things even before he reincarnated.

"Miss! I'm here~!"

Taking off his hood, Herscherik cheerfully jumped out from the crowd. A friendly, well-mannered smile appeared on his face.



The noise from the curious onlookers stopped the moment the handsome, and strangely out-of-place, boy appeared all of a sudden.

He was like a fairy right out of a folktale, immediately catching the spectators' eyes. With shimmering, blonde hair and calm eyes that were a fresh green like the feathers of a kingfisher, the handsome youth resembled the fae that announced the beginning of a green spring.

The pants he was wearing underneath his poncho could barely identify him as boy, but no one would find it odd to describe him as feminine. In fact, there could be people in this crowd who misunderstood and assumed he was a girl.

That just shows how much of a pretty boy he was, to receive such impressions.

"Eh?"

The woman raised a doubtful voice at the youth who called out to her with such familiarity. But before she could even open her mouth to ask, Herscherik spoke in rapid succession.

"Father said that if the fruits aren't from here, he doesn't want it!..... Huh? Miss, what's

wrong?”

With a questioning look on his face, Herscherik looked around his surroundings and changed his expression to a sad one as he spotted the scattered fruits. Though he had on such a sweet expression before, now his face had turned dark, like a flower in full bloom that was withering away right before the onlookers’ eyes.

“All these delicious fruits, strewn on the ground... Miss, what’s happened? Was there a problem? Shall I consult Father about this? Father has acquaintances in the Military Bureau, so I’m sure he can give you some advice!”

The Military Bureau was the department that controlled the country’s military and naval affairs. It was an organization that resembled the Ministry of Defense and JSDF of the Japan in his previous life. Here, it was the cornerstone of the country’s military strength and was deeply connected to the Order of Knights and other such organisations.

He had noticed the patrol men’s shoulders jumped in surprise, but Herscherik innocently raised his head with a curious look on his face.

“Misters, are you members of the Patrol Bureau? Father really likes fruit from this stall, so I’m sure that he’ll be sad.”

Having said so, Herscherik dropped his shoulders in sadness.

At this point, one could tell at a glance that this aristocratic young master was feeling down due to the damaged caused to his father’s favorite store. On top of that, it seemed that the boy’s father had some connections to the Military Bureau.

(Well, I’m not lying.)

Herscherik continued his act while sticking out his tongue in his head. His father was the king, so all of his ‘acquaintances’ in the Military Bureau were actually his retainers, and his father did love fruits, not to mention Herscherik hadn’t said a single word about him being nearby or anything.

“Nah, you see, I was just, you know.....”

With that, the government officials from the Patrol Bureau started mumbling

incomprehensibly about something, but the crowd dispersed and left.

Originally, the Military Bureau and the Patrol Bureau were on bad terms with each other. It seemed that the decorated Military Bureau affiliated with the Order of Knights and the Patrol Bureau tasked with preserving the public order of the country's insides were both claiming, "We're the ones more fit to protect the country."

From Herscherik's point of view, each of their jobs was different, but to the concerned parties, that comment was a negligible opinion.

"Was that alright?"

Watching the men disappear from his sight, Herscherik asked the stunned woman as he began to pick up the scattered produce. The question jolted the woman back to her senses and she panicked at the sight of the child picking up the red fruits off of the floor.

"For the young master to be doing such a thing..... especially when this is my fault... I've troubled your father as well."

"That was a bluff, so don't worry about it. More importantly, your goods are somewhat damaged, but can you sell them?"

In his past life, Herscherik was brought up with the mentality that he mustn't waste food, so he knit his brow together when he looked at the damaged fruit.

"It's such a waste..."

Someone burst out into laughter at Herscherik's muttering. Those were obviously words that wouldn't come out of a young master from an aristocratic family. With that, laughter spread through the crowd of people like a wave. They weren't sneers but warm laughter.

Everyone here understood that this was an act by Herscherik to save a woman he didn't know.

"Nice going, sonny!"

"Eh? He's not a girl? Either way, you did good for someone so small!"

A man roughly patted Herscherik's head, and a lady clapped her hands in amusement.

Herscherik received praised from them one after another, making him blush faintly in embarrassment.

Once the crowd left and he had finished gathering all the scattered fruit on the road, a considerable amount of time had passed. In the end, most of it had to be considered damaged goods and had lost their value as merchandise.

“It really is a waste...”

Herscherik whispered as he peered into the box holding the fruit that was no longer fit to be sold.

(I wonder how much time and effort went into all of these. Even just growing them ain't easy, you know!)

Thinking that, Herscherik became angry. And his anger only grew more when his occupational disease from his past life instantly calculated the cost of this loss in his head.

“Oh no, no. Thank you very much.”

The store's proprietor, Louise, smiled brightly as if to say, “But such things aren't worth being picked up.” Then, she presented one of the red fruits to Herscherik.

“It's my thanks. It's a little damaged and while it can't be presented in the store, it's still plenty delicious, and this fruit is my pride... Recently, those guys have been throwing false charges at the people all around this marketplace, extorting money; they're the worst, you know. That's why today feels soooo refreshing!”

“So that's how it is... Are the Patrol Bureau and the commercial guild fighting or something?”

Herscherik tilted his head to the side as he accepted the fruit.

“Yeah, apparently the higher ups in the Guild of Commerce tried to skimp on their public order maintenance costs to the Patrol Bureau, and failed. And because of that, there's harassment. Recently, it's been really bad, so we're quite troubled.”

Louise's words stunned Herscherik, especially when he realised he had heard something inexcusable...

(No no no, wait wait. What's "public order maintenance cost"? Protection money!?)

Herscherik was once again at his wit's end. Naturally, maintaining public order was the Patrol Bureau's responsibility, and the country was certainly in charge of covering their expenses.

(Yet, what the heck is "maintenance cost"! It may be a somewhat implicit title, but a guild that pays is still a guild, you know...)

Perhaps there was the possibility of these public payment to the Patrol Bureau were a facade and the lower positioned government officials were secretly lining their pockets. But if these underlings were left to do such a thing, then it was superiors that were unqualified; Herscherik groaned at the thoughts whirling through his head.

Regardless, this meant that there was collusion between the Patrol Bureau and the Guild of Commerce.

The Guild of Commerce was a sort of trade association that organized the market, merchants, and artisans. The guild's main job was stuff like assuring the development of the industry, ensuring the circulation of money and goods in the market, and the management of its members. However, since the guild's establishment, another one of their obligations was to pay taxes to the country. Incidentally, when it comes to region, the lord in charge of the territory was the one to collect the taxes from the citizens under his land.

(Maybe they've been paying it until now but have become reluctant because their business have started to deteriorate recently?)

'Protection money'...It was basically a "bribe" that one paid for business to run smoothly; it was a detestable thing, but it was something that couldn't be completely eradicated. However, to ignore their original job because they didn't receive bribe money; the Patrol Bureau was truly something.

"The taxes were also raised, making it even harder..."

Louise let out a deep, troubled sigh.

"Guess I'll just report this matter to the guild for now. Well, I've already decided to

close shop for today. I'm going to go talk with the guild, so wait here for a bit, okay? Because I still have to properly thank you!"

Herscherik saw her off. He then sat down on a wooden box and bit into the red fruit Louise gave him. The fruit, which resembled an apple and was a size smaller, was delicious—very sweet yet with a level of sourness that was just right. But Herscherik didn't have the luxury to just sit there enjoying fruit...

(Isn't this country in a really bad pinch?)

Biting into the fruit, Herscherik covered his forehead.

Although it wasn't at the level where you'll be hit by injustice on every step you walk, it was still too prevalent. At this rate, this terrible situation will escalate, and if such was the case, the situation would have to be treated on the level of a great catastrophe. Even a place under the King's nose, like the capital, would be a terribly troubled. Just thinking about what would become of the area was already terrifying. In the case that the citizens were pushed beyond their limits and a rebellion occurs, the hatred would most likely shift towards the king and the royal family.

In any novel, manga, or game, the king who torments his citizens would be dragged off the throne and towards death in the end.

(That's why the aristocrats controlling this country don't plan on becoming king.)

His father sat on the throne and would be made to take responsibility for any rebellion that might occur in the future.

But considering that this was about his wise father, Soleil had probably already realized it. Nevertheless, he remained on the throne in order to both protect his family and fulfill his responsibility, until his death.

(I definitely won't let that happen.)

Herscherik won't let them kill his gentle father right before his eyes.

"Anyone here~?"

"Yes~?"

Herscherik's thoughts were interrupted; he stood up and popped his head out in the

storefront with a cheery reply.

“Oh, you Mrs. Louise’s child? I didn’t hear that she had a child though.....”

“Mrs. Louise went to the Guild of Commerce.”

“Oh, is that so? That’s a problem.”

The middle-aged old man rubbed his bald head.

“I suddenly needed some fruit, so I came here in a hurry, but...”

“Well, you can leave the money with me. Which ones do you want?”

Herscherik offered to help the old man who looked troubled.

“Oh, you’ve saved me, little miss!”

“...I’m, a boy, you know?”

As Herscherik stood in the storefront and assisted the old man, customers started gathering in interest, and the fruits sold well.

Herscherik had forgotten how his looks rated when compared to the beauty of his father and brothers, but in truth, he himself was a handsome boy. And he was raised well and very sociable.

To men, regardless of age, he would tilt his head to the side and ask with upturned eyes, “Mister, this one is also delicious. I kinda want you to eat this.”

To women, he would provide innocent and sweet compliments, saying, “I would be happy if a beautiful lady, like you Miss, were to buy these fruits,” working hard to vend the produce.

The gestures he used to grab ahold of the men’s hearts were referenced from the capture targets in the gal games ¹ from his past life. He also used the ikemen characters’ lines from otome games to make the women’s hearts flutter. His knowledge from his past life was unexpectedly useful in this situation. “Moe” may be a common theme across the whole world, or rather, across time-and-space.

Besides, the primary reason was probably that this small child was working hard to sell. There were many people who came and unintentionally bought extra stuff.

Nevertheless, there were customers who thought that since they were dealing with a

child, they could short change him and he wouldn't stop them. To such a bunch, Herscherik would teasingly say, "Mister? Isn't a thief someone who walks away with goods without negotiating first? Which is better: the Regional Legal Affairs Bureau, Military Bureau, or Patrol Bureau?" and then make them buy at ridiculously high prices. For those people who make orders like, "I'll take 2 of those and 3 of these. Ah, forget that 1st part and I'll take 4 of those. And for this one, forget it..." in order to mess around and cause confusion, Herscherik would flick the beads of an abacus in his head. He would hand over the goods and demand payment without mistaking a single copper coin.

In the end, even all the fruits that had fallen over were sold out, albeit for a cheaper price. By the time Louise returned, half of the goods in the storefront had already disappeared.

"Welcome back."

Herscherik held out the bag filled with money and a piece of paper.

"Customers came, so I tended the store in the meanwhile. I more or less sold everything at the market price, so I think it should be fine, but....."

Louise opened her eyes wide as she looked at the document Herscherik so confidently handed her. The type of fruit sold, its unit price, quantity, and total cost were all neatly listed on it; at the bottom, the total sum was properly recorded. According to Louise's memory, this was the highest sales for this month.

"Since chefs can cook the damaged fruits and all, so I sold just it to them at a cheap price. I did ask for their address though."

When Louise looked at the spot Herscherik was talking about and there certainly were a number of addresses written in the margin of the document.

Louise was left speechless by his brilliance, but Herscherik took her reaction as a criticism.

".....Sorry for doing something unnecessary."

"Oh heavens no! I was just taken back by how amazing you are despite being so young!"

This was something unbelievable for a boy, who had yet to reach 5 years old, to

accomplish all by himself.

“On top of helping me, you also tended to the store... I have to thank you somehow.”

Louise said, thinking deeply about it. But an idea of what appropriate gift to give to an aristocrat's son as a sign of thanks didn't really appear.

“Then!”

Herscherik's eyes twinkled at Louise's words.

“Is it alright with you if I come over to play and help out again?”

These unexpected words surprised Louise.

“That's fine; rather, I would be thankful for it, but...”

“Hurray!”

Herscherik jumped around in joy, and Louise resigned. After all, the person himself said he wanted to do it. That was probably a praiseworthy part of the young master. But Louise thought to herself that she didn't get the same feeling from this child as she did from aristocrats who looked down on the commoners.

“Ah, I should be heading back home now.”

Herscherik took out his pocket watch. Although he had left the castle a little bit past noon, it had already turned 4 o'clock. There was the possibility that if he didn't return soon, they would find out that he had disappeared.

“I'll come again, Ms. Louise!”

“Yeah, I'll be waiting!..... And boy!”

Louise held back Herscherik who started to run off.

“Your name!?”

“My name... Her...”

Herscherik panicked and swallowed back his words just as he was about to carelessly reveal his true name. It could end badly if he revealed that he had the same name as a

prince.

That's why he decided to use a name that he was familiar with.

"It's Ryouko!"

Then Herscherik hurried on his way back. Seeing him off, Louise repeated the name.

"Ryouko', quite an unusual name."

After that, Herscherik occasionally appeared in the castle town and stopped by Louise's store. He would help out and contribute to the sales while gathering information.

In the beginning, the castle town residents watched with curious eyes at the young aristocrat helping out in the storefront, but before they realized it, it became an ordinary scene; within a day, the mood turned underwhelming.

On another note, Kuro was enjoying his long-awaited break and noticed Herscherik actively working in the storefront and it caused him to burst into laughter, to the point where he even had trouble breathing.

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1. *Gal games* are games targeted towards a male audience. *Capture targets* refer to the female characters the player hopes to make fall in love with him.

Chapter 6

Smiling face, Grief, and Black dog

Herscherik grew with each change of the seasons, from spring to summer, and now autumn.

It had been about half a year since Herscherik had first decided to sneak out to the castle town. On the afternoon when his studies, swordsmanship and horsemanship training, weren't scheduled, taking the secret path to go outside became his routine for the day.

"Thank you very much!"

Herscherik handed the paper bag containing a pear-like fruit to the customer and put on a sweet smile.

"On the days when little Ryouko is here, the number of customers and sales increases; you're so helpful."

The proprietress of the fruit store, Louise, said in a good mood. Today's sales had already greatly exceeded that of the previous day.

"Hey, honey!"

Louise called out to a giant man, who seemed twice as tall and four times as wide as she was. He also had a beard, making him look more like a woodcutter than a fruit seller, and it seemed that everyone agreed.

The man didn't respond to Louise's words as he carried a box of fruits. He glanced at Herscherik but immediately averted his gaze and returned to his work.

(Just like *Beauty and the Beast*...)

"Honey, you're so antisocial. Little Ryouko being here has been a big help, so say some thanks, will ya!"

At Louise's words, he once again glanced at the boy, but silently looked away and

began to delicately polish the fruit with a cloth. For some reason, his appearance from behind looked cute.

“Really, you’re so shy.”

Herscherik couldn’t figure out where and how he felt embarrassed by this, but convinced himself that it was probably due to the love-filled interactions between this married wife and husband.

“Which reminds me, Little Ryouko, are you alright? You’re helping us out so much, but do your parents not say anything?”

“My mother passed away when I was born, and since my father is always busy, I only see him occasionally, so it’s not a problem.”

He had told them the truth, but the two adults still had on uncomfortable faces. Though to be fair, the husband always had a frown on his face anyway. As a result, Herscherik couldn’t catch the subtleties of this change in expression very well, but he could feel that the mood wasn’t good and quickly added in a panic.

“But my father said that it’s okay for me to do what I want, so it’s alright!”

(Huh, their eyes are looking at me like I’m an even more pitiful child.....)

Even though Herscherik was merely talking about his own circumstances, somewhere along the line, it seemed that he had dug his own grave.

Herscherik was troubled by the current mood, so he held out the pear-like fruit in front of him. As Herscherik looked up, the husband looked down at the boy, timidly accepted the fruit, and returned to his work.

“Sorry for bringing up such an insensitive topic. It’s almost time for you to go back though, right? Will you come and play tomorrow?”

Herscherik looked up at the sky. Before he had realized it, the sunset had spread across the horizon. Although he had been concentrating on helping out, there was also the fact that sunset was much earlier due to it being winter, like in his previous world’s Japan.

(On that subject, it also feels like the climate resembles that of Japan.)

While thinking so, Herscherik looked at his pocket watch. It was much later than he expected. Recently, being here was so much fun that he unintentionally ended up overstaying.

“I will head home. I’ll come here again tomorrow!”

Herscherik rushed to prepare for his trip back. Suddenly, Louise clapped her hands as if she had just remembered something.

“Lately, there’s been people I haven’t seen around here..... maybe they’re people from the countryside. Anyways, they’re increasing in numbers. And it looks like there’s some trouble between them and the Patrol. As the public order has gotten bad, be careful on your way back, okay? If you don’t mind, I can let my husband escort you back.”

At her words, her husband sluggishly stood up. He looked like he was ready to escort him, but as much as Herscherik was thankful for their care, it would be too troublesome.

“I’m fine. I’ll be careful on my way back. And thank you for the fruit!”

Herscherik said as he gave a quick bow to the husband who had stood up. He then ran out of the store. Louise watched his figure from behind until she could no longer see it.

“Today was also fun.”

She and her husband still hadn’t had any children yet. Since they couldn’t afford to raise one, she had held off on that. However, since that young boy who called himself Ryouko showed up, the married couple had become a bit brighter and felt like they wanted to have a child.

The country right now wasn’t in a good place. The king was partial to his aristocrats, and those aristocrats and government officials were operating only for their own benefits. Even the lower government officials were ignoring the citizens’ needs.

This was a country that was difficult to live in for a member of the general public. However, the reason why they hadn’t left this country yet was that they preferred

remaining in this country whose security and stability persisted, rather than restarting from zero in a foreign country. Besides, the imperial capital was much better than the countryside. One's livelihood becomes more severe the farther away one was from the imperial capital.

Both Louise and her husband hated those aristocrats and government officials. The taxes that increased day after day cut into their living expenses; they would be unable to sell anything unless they lower the price, yet if they reduce the price to sell, then their living standards would become strained. And even though they pay their taxes, it was not like their lives had become better.

The citizens believed that it was because of the negligence of each and every one of those who hold onto the government's center. Every now and then, an aristocrat would appear, dressed in gaudy outfits and not a bit concerned about their citizens' troubles.

(But that child seems somewhat different, hum.)

Ryouko came up in Louise's mind.

He was a young boy with straight, silky, blonde hair; blue eyes that made you think of a gentle spring season, and features that resemble a healthy-looking girl with white skin. His words were ambitious for his age, and as soon as he realized that he had said something adult-like, he would act delighted at something childish and dive headfirst with curiosity into the things he didn't know about.

(His attire and manners are excellent, making me wonder who's son he is.....)

It would be a disappointment if he grew up to be like the other aristocrats in the future, walking around like they owned the place. But, he didn't look like he would become someone like that. Instead, she held some kind of hope that he would do something that would change the aristocrats for people like her.

"Hey, I'll be closing up shop."

"Ok~ay."

It looks like even her unsociable husband was fond of Ryouko.

Louise knew. Her husband had secretly bought a stuffed teddy bear in hopes of giving it to Ryouko having mistaken him for a girl somehow, but finding out later he worried, "To give a stuffed animal to a boy is....." and ended up not giving it.

She fell in love with the “gap ¹” of how his scary face can naturally shift into a cute one, and she ended up marrying him.

(Should I bake some sweets or something tomorrow~)

Ryouko would definitely be very happy about that. His smiling face appeared in her thoughts, and Louise’s own face broke into a smile. Her unsociable husband threw an worried look at Louise, and noticing it, she quickly began to clean up.

The next day, the married couple opened their fruit store as usual, but when the time when Ryouko..... no, Herscherik usually showed up came around, he didn’t make a single appearance.

“This is really weird, honey.”

Even though this was the usual time, Herscherik didn’t appear. Louise brushed off tending to the store to wait outside and peer in the direction he generally came from. The baked sweets that would surely make him happy were in the back of the store, and when her eyes fell upon them, she let out a sigh.

“Even though that child has never broken a promise once...”

Uneasy, Louise unconsciously started muttering to herself.

That boy would mention if he wasn’t going to come, and on days where it could be an issue, he would tell her, “Tomorrow might be a bit difficult...”

The way he declared it yesterday meant that he would definitely come. Even her husband’s forehead wrinkles were greater in number than usual. It certainly wasn’t because he was angry; he was worried.

“I wonder if it’ll be better if I consulted with the patrolmen...”

(But, what should I say? ‘The aristocratic child who also comes by to help isn’t coming today.’ Something like that?)

Louise went through several situations in her head and it drained her of her strength.

(No good. I'll definitely be sent away.....)

Bump She turned and saw that her husband had already begun to walk away, and with a look that said he was ready to kill someone right now.

"Wait, honey! Where are you going!?"

"To the Patrol Bureau."

"If you went there like that, you'll be arrested instead!"

(That is the face of a murderer or a kidnapper!)

Louise added but only in her thoughts. If she did say it, it would most certainly hurt him. She clung to the burly arm of her husband as he tried to walk away.

"Hm, what's wrong?"

Louise, who was desperately holding back her husband, suddenly stopped her struggling and turned to look for the voice. The husband's eyes were also on the source of the question.

A young man in his 20's was standing there.

His height was roughly that of her husband's, but he had a smaller physique and his figure seemed supple.

The youth left quite the impression with his glossy black hair and dark, ruby colored eyes that would make the heart of any woman around his age flutter. He stood in front of the store and tilted his head to the side at the flustered couple.

"Come to think of it, the blonde boy who is sometimes in the store isn't here, huh. Did somethin' happen?"

"Yeah, it's a bit worrying..."

Louise was lured by the man's concerned look and opened her mouth.

"Even though he said that he would come today, he didn't arrive during his usual time..... I'm worried since, recently, the public order around this area has gotten bad and all."

".....That is indeed... worrying."

“Yes, it really is. I just hope nothing bad has happened.....”

The young man bought several fruits while giving appropriate responses to Louise’s words, and then he vanished into the street.

When Louise pressed against her husband again, a thought suddenly appeared in her head.

(Hum, guess he knew that Little Ryouko was a boy, huh.)

If that handsome of a youth had previously come to the store, he would have definitely left an impression on Louise. However, this was the very first time she had ever seen him.

But as she returned to desperately holding back her husband from charging at the Patrol, she completely forgot about her query and the young man.

Once he left the fruit store behind and blended into the crowd and disappeared naturally into a back alley without creating a single sound.

If there was a human who was watching him, then they might have questioned that all too-natural, and conversely creepy action, but there was no one who noticed him.

When he entered the back alley, he tossed the fruits he just bought to a street urchin squatting there.

The child was about to give some thanks, but when he saw the man’s face, he let out a small scream and fled.

The man’s expression was the complete opposite of what he had shown Louise; this one was of coldness and anger.

(It’s strange.)

The young man was the hardworking spy for hire, who Herscherik called Kuro. He recalled the events when he infiltrated the castle yesterday. It was unusually busy, especially in the direction of the inner palace.

Knights and soldiers went back and forth in a flurry, so he gave up on completing his job yesterday.

And now, the boy didn’t show up to the store he regularly snuck out to. Based on all of that had happened so far, there was only one answer with the highest possibility.

The man furrowed his brow and began to run.

His destination was a place that all those of the underground know of: 'the Information Broker'.

The toll to pay at this information broker was higher than other places. Nevertheless, all knew that the information exchanged was equal in value to the large cost.

What came to Kuro's mind as he ran was the smiling face of the strange, blonde prince.

The prince who, every time they met, had a distinctly un-childlike expression and acted in a manner uncharacteristic of royalty. Kuro was still unaware that, in order to meet the boy, he had been making excuses to infiltrate this dangerous castle.

To Kuro, his jobs were for money, and aristocrats who would squander their money were good prey, although they were also a hateful existence. When one worked in the underground, one would see their darkness, regardless of whether one wanted to or not.

But Kuro didn't feel a single ounce of darkness from that prince.

Whenever he was near the boy, Kuro felt strangely comfortable, and it would become somewhat difficult for him to leave. He couldn't even refuse any question or request from the boy. Kuro was swayed by the feeling first created when he encountered him: enjoyment.

If the reason for prince's current disappearance was because of the secret path Kuro had shown him, then there would be too much regret for him to feel by himself.

Before he became aware of it, Kuro's pace quickened till he was running like the wind.

All he wanted was to see the prince's smiling face and feel at ease.

-
1. *When one's expectation of a person ends up turning 180°, but it is seen as endearing and cute. In this case, her husband looks like a burly, stoic man, but it turns out that he's simply shy and thinks of such cute gifts.*

Hersherik was dreaming of being in the middle of fluffy clouds.

He felt like there was something about this that he needed to consider, but even that thought floated away, not allowing any thoughts to be collected.

(Ugh, it's too much work. It's fine if I just leave it like this, right...)

Right as Herscherik was about to start thinking of such listless things, his senses were revived

by a man's angry voice and a woman's cries.

Although he was still feeling hazy, he was barely able to process the thought that this place wasn't his own room. What led him to this conclusion was that the bed he was laying on was definitely not of the same high-quality as his usual one.

(This feeling..... could it sleeping medicine?)

Herscherik guessed that this was an abnormal situation.

When he was job-searching in his past life, there were times when Ryouko's emotional state would become unstable, and there was nothing she could do about it. Every day she would be unable to sleep because of the anxiety, causing her physical condition to fail. As such, she would accidentally make mistakes in her interviews, falling into a vicious cycle.

During that time, she went to a mental health clinic recommended by her parents and received a prescription for medicine after talking to the doctor. However, she had relatives listen to the stuff she couldn't say to either the doctor or her parents, and this resolved her anxiety. She didn't take the medicine out of fear of the side effects, but luckily for her, everything went well.

Incidentally, she changed her tactics of applying, breaking, and opening up after all of that. As a result, her job searching endeavor went surprisingly swimmingly, and that was how she landed her job.

The side effects he had timidly read about on the internet were surely similar to his situation right now—

Physical fatigue from dizziness and headaches.

These were obstructing his thoughts.

(Don't make a 4 year-old kid take sleeping medicine!)

While his mind was still drugged, Herscherik tried to recall to the best of his abilities what had happened before he fell asleep.

He had snuck through the secret path just as usual and had returned to his room without anyone discovering him. Of course, he had held on to the book he had previously borrowed from the library, making his alibi perfect.

He had killed time until dinner by reading, and while he ate the food Meria had prepared for him, he was thinking about where he should conduct his nighttime "Charge In ☆ Internal Audit" this time.

(The sautéed chicken meat was delicious. The pumpkin-like soup was also good.....)

The meals for the royal family were left in the hands of the master chief who prepared masterpieces for them every day. Leaving aside Ryouko's cooking skills in his past life, Herscherik loved eating.

(.....I have no memories after that. I don't even remember eating dessert.)

In short, the sleeping medicine had been mixed in with the dinner he ate.

(So that means I was put to sleep by the medicine and kidnapped, huh. Tch, I missed out on dessert. Well then, what should I do now.....)

His thoughts and senses were dulled, possibly due to the medicine's side effects, and it was fortunate that this didn't cause any panic in him. Additionally, his headache was gradually lessening, and the thoughts that had been floating away on a cloud had returned. Despite experiencing nausea from the dizziness and headache, he surveyed his current location.

Was this place a storehouse? There were several people in this large space, and right in front of him were a man and woman, arguing.

He didn't know the man, but the woman was someone who was with him and took care of him since he was born.

(Meria?)

This was the first time he had seen her look so shaken.

“Didn’t you say you wouldn’t do anything extreme! I only brought His Highness with me because you said that you wanted to talk!”

“Well, if you had a proper conversation with the king, then we could have gone by without having to do this!”

“I did speak with His Majesty! But His Majesty.....”

“Didn’t he say that he wouldn’t save us!? In that case, we had no choice **but** to take this extreme measure!”

The argument between the two continued to escalate.

(How should I put it? This is the first time I’ve seen Meria this upset, huh.)

Possibly due to his head being unable to function properly, his thoughts strayed off into something unrelated.

Meria always had her hair tightly tied up in a bun on the back of her head, giving off a prim feeling. However, her hair now was let down and in disarray, and there were tears accumulating in her drooping eyes.

(The number of wrinkles might have increased since I first met her.....)

Meria was much younger than his mother in his past life. As such, she seemed more like an older sister than a nanny.

He was the eldest sister in his previous life and always wanted an older brother or sister. So, he was happy for Meria being there and felt a closer familiarity to her than his own mother whom he had never met.

(From what I can tell, it looks like you talked to Father, but it didn’t go too well. You could’ve talked to me though.....)

Herscherik wanted to call out to her, but it was frustrating that he couldn’t move his mouth well.

“Please, we have to let a doctor look at Master Herscherik!”

Meria couldn’t help but worry when Herscherik’s condition from the medicine went further than she had imagined. It was too terrifying for her to imagine if this continued and he wouldn’t wake up. That was why Meria was clinging to the man’s arm.

But that man shook her off from the arm she was clinging to, and the woman with her powerless female body fell to the ground.

“ah...”

Meria's fallen form reflected in Herscherik's eyes among the risen dust, and a small voice leak out from him.

At that moment, an unusual event happened inside the room. The door that connected them to the outside was literally blown away. The hinges came off with a loud noise together with dust dancing around in the air.

Standing and surrounded by this dust was a man who appeared completely dressed in black and tightly gripping the napes of grown men with both of his hands.

(This definitely doesn't seem very spy-like...)

Herscherik had the thought that spies were supposed to be more stylish as he looked at the man, Kuro.

From the completely black clothing that covered his body, he appeared as though he was a dark hero.

He wore a black hood, and a black cloth covered his mouth. The only visible thing was his blood red eyes. His eyes that were usually very cool looked like they were now filled with anger.

He threw a large, exhausted man with one hand at another nearby, who was frozen with no idea what was happening. He let out a voice that sounded like a crushed frog, but Kuro threw the man in his other hand the same way without feeling anything. Although this one didn't hit anyone, the sound of a crushed frog still leaked out.

Then, Kuro began to slowly walk.

The men came to their senses, picked up metal rods and planks of wood, and ran to attack, but Kuro avoided them with minimal movements. He used his hand like a sword to repel their weapons and punch them in stomach. His movements were fluid, making it look like he was dancing.

In less than 10 seconds, the three men who were trying to attack Kuro kissed the ground, and after that, everyone else gave up on rushing towards Kuro. No, they were like frogs, unable to move as they were glared at by a snake weaving his way through them.

“If you come at me again, I’ll kill you.”

Kuro’s tone was different from the one that Herscherik always heard.

It was a tone so cold that went below freezing, and the sentence deterred anyone from coming close, for it wasn’t just a threat.

The next time, they would really be killed. Everyone in this room understood that.

Kuro slipped past the people, went right in front of Herscherik, knelt down on one knee, and met his gaze.

The eyes that looked upon Herscherik weren’t angry, but shook with anxiety—a complete change from before.

“Were you drugged by them or something?”

Kuro placed his hand on Herscherik’s forehead. As his hand was cool and felt nice, Herscherik closed his eyes.

“Mi... ster..... Ku.....”

“It’s only a temporary side effect. Once the medicine leaves your system, you’ll be fine, so relax.”

As he said that, Kuro carried Herscherik in his arms. Herscherik was embarrassed at his current situation being held in a “bridal carry”, but now wasn’t the time for that.

“Mister... Kuro, I... talk.....”

“I cannot let you take the prince!”

Standing up and interrupting Herscherik mid-sentence was the man who had been arguing with Meria before. In his hand was a dagger, and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Our lives..... we’re risking our lives, you know!”

“Like I care.”

Kuro coldly scoffed at the man's anger-filled words. There was no emotion in Kuro's eyes.

He let out an extremely bothersome sigh as he fixed his hold on Herscherik to one hand. Before anyone noticed, the empty hand was already clutching a knife.

"Mr. Ku..."

Before Herscherik could finish his word, his brain was shoved to the side. The man had rushed towards Kuro, and Kuro had avoided him.

In his next movement, Kuro used his own knife to flick the dagger out of the man's hand, and continuing with that motion, he aim for that man's neck—to the carotid artery.

Just as Kuro had said, he was really going for the kill.

(Listen when people are talkinnngggg!)

Something snapped in Herscherik's mind. More specifically, his storage of patience snapped. The blood rising up to his head blew away the side effects and cleared the thoughts that were clouded by a fog.

"Kuro, wait!"

He commanded Kuro like how he had ordered his beloved dog in his past life and patted Kuro's head.

This attack came from an unexpected place, so Kuro made a face similar to a pigeon that had been hit by a peashooter.

"Even though I said... that I wanted to listen to their story... why didn't... you wait... for me....."

Because Herscherik suddenly moved, he was assaulted by dizziness, and the end of his sentence tapered off.

Herscherik felt chills run through his body as if the blood withdrew from his head all the way down to the tips of his toes. He was overcome with nausea, but he endured it. This would all be meaningless if he just collapsed here.

".....Kuro, put me down. If you keep holding me up, I can't look at them in the face and listen to their side."

“.....But.”

“Then, Kuro, you will sit. Sit, boy!”

Kuro showed his dissatisfaction, but Herscherik had ordered him like he would a beloved dog. He also didn't forget to gesture towards the floor with his hand.

Although he had always attached “Mister” at the beginning of Kuro's name up till now, the omission of it could have meant that Herscherik thought of the man at the same level as his dog. Or possibly that Herscherik thought that the dog Kuro was much more of an obedient child.

In the end, Kuro compromised by setting Herscherik down on a simple bed and himself standing right beside him, ready for orders.

“Okay then, talk, Meria.”

Herscherik called out to Meria who hadn't move since the other man was knocked over.

“.....Master Herscherik, I am deeply sorry.”

Meria bowed her head. Her apology looked like it truly came from the bottom of her heart, but Herscherik wasn't looking for an apology right now.

“Leave the apologies for afterwards. I want you to tell me why you drugged me and even brought me here. Meria, you know these people, right? And I heard them mention that their livelihood and actual lives were on the line.”

Those were the words he heard while his consciousness was still floating in the clouds. He didn't know the specifics, but he did comprehend that they were driven in a corner.

“...Our birthplace is the territory once governed by Master Luzeria.”

Herscherik opened his eyes wide at the mention of the name that he hadn't heard in a while.

That was the name of the man who gave Herscherik his motive. If it wasn't for that man, Herscherik wouldn't notice anything and be headed straight to becoming a completely worthless prince right now.

“Master Luzeria passed away, and a new lord had come to our land. And that man is Count Grimm.”

That was also a name Herscherik knew.

He took the opportunity left by Count Luzeria’s death penalty declaration. It could be said that he was the one who drove the count to such.

“...That man’s doing whatever he wants to Master Luzeria’s territory.”

The man Kuro tried to kill opened his mouth.

Everyone from that territory didn’t believe that Count Luzeria sold out his country or any such acts. Their lord was just and at the same time, he treated his people as precious as family members. If there was a famine, he would open up the food reserves and share the hardship together with everyone.

However, after the accident that took his wife and child away, Count Luzeria changed into a different person, haunted by something that kept him investigating. During that time, the citizens repeatedly saw his face filled with distraught as he came and went in all different directions. As the months passed, they were informed that he had sold out the country and was given the death penalty, and then a new lord showed up.

Count Grimm was the complete opposite of Count Luzeria: the lowest and worst lord the citizens ever had.

He collected more taxes than the one established by the country and also sold, to line his own pockets, all the reserved food Count Luzeria had prepared in case of a famine.

Sure enough, the weather turned worse, and a famine plagued the territory, but not only did the lowest and worst lord not lower the taxes, he also hired thugs to forcefully collect them.

“Not even two years have passed, yet many people have lost weight. I don’t even know if the elderly and sick can make it past this year’s winter... That goes for my own parents as well.”

Meria sorrowfully muttered. Since the beginning, that territory of this country had poor land; food was hard to grow, and the climate led to misfortune. Dilapidation happened in the blink of an eye.

"I received a letter from my parents, went into contact with my cousin, and immediately appealed the situation to His Majesty. However..."

"Father didn't act."

"Yes."

Meria bit her lips shut. The color of despair was dark in her expression.

(It's not that Father didn't act; he couldn't.)

Herscherik easily guessed his father's circumstances.

Just like with the Count, he couldn't save them. However, the complaints from the citizens weren't enough for proof. As long as there wasn't concrete evidence, his father couldn't carelessly move.

But that was why Herscherik studied, learned how to read and write, snuck into the royal castle, and conducted his unofficial audits. This was all to obtain inescapable evidence. As long as there was proof that will become their trump card, his father could banish those tyrannical aristocrats who act like they run the country.

However, the main culprit and his group who have long ruled over the royal castle for so long didn't leave any traces of a single definitive proof inside the castle. Or, maybe they hid it so skillfully that even they themselves couldn't find it. Although one could find numerous suspicious aspects, none of them were conclusive.

Nevertheless, there was no way Herscherik was going to give up and admit defeat. Because if he doesn't take any measures, his father, family, himself, and even the citizens would be in danger.

Herscherik, who had no magic, no physical training, and no one to support him, had to do this.

The only thing that Herscherik could do was to search for where to use his skills from his past life to change and finally support the country.

These people were fundamentally the same as himself. They wanted to protect those dear to them. It was just that they failed in their execution.

"So, you decided to abduct me ¹ and threaten Father."

Herscherik let out a deep sigh, amazed at these people who remained silent.

“Even if you did such a thing, Father cannot act, you know. If anything, it will be your positions that get worse..... You cannot complain about you and your entire family receiving the death penalty for the sin of treason against the country.”

It was a sin to lay a hand on royalty. It didn't matter for what reason; they kidnapped the prince and threatened the royal family. Even if it was only a plan to do so, doing such to the royal family that rules this country, even a child would know what would come out from this.

“.....I understand your situation. Give me some time.”

Herscherik surveyed those around him. He looked at each of those silent and unmoving people in their eyes and nodded.

“I'll try to do something by winter.”

To those words, not only did Meria and the folks from Count Luzeria's territory eyes open wide, but Kuro as well.

Those weren't the words a young child would say.

And it was only Kuro who noticed the slight odd thing in his words.

The boy who would usually refer to himself as a boy changed into a feminine way of addressing himself ².

“I promised Count Luzeria.”

What Herscherik pulled out from his breast pocket was the old, beautiful, silver pocket watch he had received from the Count.

All of those who lived in his territory recognized it.

The Count that deserved their respect and love always carried and treasured it.

“.....Master Luzeria.”

Someone whispered, and tears overflowed from everyone else's eyes.

Their beloved and respected Count was no longer in this world. The Count's beloved family wasn't around either. And now, the land and its people left behind were being oppressed by a tyrant. Their reality was weighing heavily on their chest.

"Trust me."

Herscherik said as the resolve he had when he received Count Luzeria's pledge dwelled in his eyes.

The 7th prince returned that night to a noisy royal castle.

The first one to discover the prince and his nanny was the main gatekeeper. Even though her hair was let down and a mess, the nanny returned with the prince in her arms and was guarded by the gatekeeper as he led her in.

Receiving the news, the king ran out without listening to his retainers telling him to stop. He tightly embraced the staggering youngest prince.

The king most likely didn't get any rest last night as his pale face was becoming paler.

According to the nanny's testimony, this was what happened.

Someone invaded the inner palace and kidnapped the 7th prince and the nanny who was beside him.

They were taken to a hiding place, but luckily seeing an opportunity, the nanny rescued the prince and escaped.

Later, someone from a cabin in the castle town a little bit away from the hiding place in which they were confined had taken the evidence that was there, making it impossible for a criminal to be arrested.

The case of the kidnapped youngest prince closed with his miraculous return.

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1. *Herscherik usually uses "boku" to refer to himself, but he says "watashi" starting from here. I'll explain the subtitles in a later note.*
 2. *boku is used by young boys while watashi is used by women or men in formal situations*



Herscherik sat on a sofa in the middle of his dimly-lit room and gazed at the flames in the fireplace.

After spending the whole day in his room by himself, it felt somewhat vast, and he let out a small sigh.

(I've lived by myself before, so this should be normal for me, but... unexpectedly, it looks like I can't stand being alone.)

Herscherik noticed that he had been spoiled by Meria a lot more than expected. Letting out a bitter laugh, he thought back to when he returned to the castle.

After his return, his father asked persistently, yet he didn't tell him the truth. If he did, then those people, as well as their families, would receive the death penalty for conspiring to kidnap the prince.

"My stubbornness was probably inherited from my mother..."

He had claimed that, before he realized what happened, he was saved by Meria, so he really didn't know anything. His father hung his head and muttered in resignation.

"You alright?"

Herscherik was deep in thought about his past, but in this room where he was supposed to be alone, he was greeted from behind.

However, Herscherik didn't move, continuing to stare at the flickering flames in the fireplace. He rubbed the pad of his thumb on the pocket watch unconsciously as he answered.

"I've caused you some trouble, haven't I, Mr. Kuro? I'm sorry."

He sensed the presence behind him tensed their shoulders, but he didn't turn around.

".....It's not like you need to apologize or anything. Also, just 'Kuro' is fine."

"Really? Then you can just call me Hersche."

Herscherik tilted his head to the side, revealing a smile. The image of his beloved dog

Kuro appeared in his head, but he didn't say anything.

"Kuro, you really are a master spy, aren't you? I was surprised."

Thanks to Kuro appearing, this incident was officially resolved.

Fabricating another location as their hideout in lieu of the place he was taken to and allowing the folks from Count Luzeria's territory to escape the imperial capital were all thanks to him.

Kuro was truly a master as shown by his abilities, from the glimpses of his fighting skills in the place Herscherik was kidnapped, and how he managed to sneak into the inner palace, despite how strict the security had become now.

"Really, thank you. Although I don't have anything on me right now, I'll reward you soon."

"I'll be waiting without getting my hopes up... But are you really going?"

Herscherik knew that Kuro was probably listening to his request to his father from somewhere, so he looked around the area.

When he held down the button that opened the pocket watch, a portrait of three people who were no longer in this world appeared.

(The people who these three cared about are in trouble. There's no way I'd let them be abandoned.)

"I'm definitely going."

Herscherik answered, full of determination.

Previously, Herscherik had made one request to his dejected father.

"Since Meria is very exhausted from this incident, I want to allow her to return to her hometown. And I want to be there to escort her since I'm grateful for what she did."

However, Meria's homecoming was only a pretext. His true goal was to go to the territory and obtain evidence of injustice. It might be difficult for him with his childish physique, but if he didn't do it, there would be victims of poverty this winter.

His father was against allowing him to leave the imperial capital. However, Herscherik's resolve wouldn't break.

The parent and child were trapped in a stalemate, so Luke, the butler quietly waiting beside the king, offered a proposition.

"Your Majesty, how about we have a primary butler accompany Master Herscherik? I think it's about time for one to be necessary, so if he brings one with him, he should be fine, no?"

The king threw his butler a look that said, "Don't say such unnecessary things!" but the butler pretended that he didn't notice it.

"A primary butler?"

Herscherik tilted his head to the side. He had studied as much as possible, but with this, he realized that there were still many of this country's customs that he didn't know. One reason for this was that those kinds of things didn't fall into his interests. Furthermore, his mother who was supposed to teach him customs and conventions passed away, and his father was swamped with continuous work. He also had little contact with his prince and princess siblings, so there was no way he could know everything he needed to.

"Simply put, a primary butler is a butler who works not for the country, but for the sake of a single aristocrat... akin to a retainer, I would say."

Luke explained to Herscherik in an easy-to-understand manner.

Each primary butler was an exclusive butler assigned to only a single prince from the current and former royal families. The primary butlers pledge their allegiance to their lord for the rest of their lives. If done poorly ¹, the two of them together become an existence that lasts longer than a married couple.

"While it is usually customary for a primary butler to be chosen after you've grown a bit more, I believe the time is ripe, now that Meria will be separated from you."

Luke mentioned that he had hoped that knights and magicians would accompany him along with the primary butler, but a butler comes first.

".....Even though I would be fine with Kuro being my primary butler..."

Herscherik muttered to himself.

(How do I put it... we get along, and he's composed, and...)

Herscherik believed that the reason for this was that Kuro understood his true intentions.

Possibly because their encounter was so jarring or the places they met were so peculiar, Kuro interacted with not a child or prince, but Herscherik's true self. Despite him acting like a child of his age to avoid worrying even his father, he felt at ease whenever he was beside Kuro.

Thinking back to his past life, the only time he acted frank was when he was either alone or in front of his family. When he was in front of coworkers or friends, he made sure to create the appropriate persona. It's because that way was more comfortable.

"...Is it because I'm an excellent spy?"

"Huh?"

Dumbfounded, Herscherik raised his voice at Kuro's question and finally turned to look at him.

Before him was Kuro, who still appeared the same when he came to rescue him; the latter's eyes were full of emotion as he looked at the boy.

"Eh? Why say that? Kuro is Kuro, right? Or are you saying that you saved me because I'm a prince?"

Herscherik answered with eyes wide open, but Kuro retreated into the darkness without a word.

(What the heck is wrong with Kuro?... Well, I get it. He can't become a primary butler.)

People serving the royal family must prove their identity. Especially considering the extent of Luke's explanation, the butler must have some kind of deep connection to the royal family. Customarily, they would be people who refuse to inherit their aristocratic role or are sons of wealthy merchants, but there have been many instances of people coming with recommendation letters to gain fame or connection to the royal family.

He wondered if those such people could really understand what he wanted to do. Rather, is there going to be anyone who wanted to come to him, the 7th prince without any aristocratic support?

Just by thinking that, Herscherik became depressed.

There was also another reason that pulled his spirit down even lower.

Even though he had resolved himself, he would be separating from Meria who had raised him like a foster parent.

“Meria, I know you understood, therefore you cannot come here anymore.”

“You don’t have any other choice,” Herscherik said. If her serving sleeping medicine to the prince and kidnapping him became public, she would not be able to escape unharmed no matter how much he protected her. That was why it was absolutely necessary to set her free before anything could happen.

“What I have done is most certainly inexcusable...”

Before Herscherik went to discuss Meria’s homecoming with his father, he told her this when the two were alone.

Meria knelt down with her head close to her knees. This caused the carpet to rub against her face, but Herscherik shook his head as he helped her up,

“I understand your feelings. I want to aid you; I want to do something. However, I want you to let me say at least this.”

Probably at that time, he felt sadness and anger mixed together with his loneliness. That was why he couldn’t stop himself from saying this.

“Father placed his trust in you. But, you betrayed his trust... you betrayed my trust.”

If she hadn’t kidnapped him or such and simply opened up to him, surely a different future would be ahead of them. Confiding in a 5 year old who had yet to mature surely seemed like a complicated situation, but she was the only woman his father trusted beside his mother, and the man entrusted his own child to her.

“I understand that you are in a difficult position. But, I don’t believe that it gives you any grounds to think it’s fine to betray those who believed in you.”

Meria broke down at his words. Herscherik couldn’t bring himself to stop her from leaving, her head hanging low.

“What the heck is ‘It’s not fine to betray those who believed in you’...”

Herscherik laughed in self-mockery. Half of the words he said to Meria were also directed towards himself.

It was no exaggeration to say that he was lying and betraying his father right now.

He was playing the innocent youngest prince, hiding his past life and current movements.

All of this was to protect his father. All of this was to protect those he wanted to protect.

“Nevertheless.....”

Herscherik strengthened his grip on the pocket watch.

“I... want to protect...”

Even if this was his self-satisfying indulgence, it was still a desire of his—something entrusted to him by Count Luzeria.

While thinking of such, Herscherik felt his chest tighten oppressively.

Luke was the one to prepare his breakfast the next day.

He was a flawless butler, perfectly setting the table without leaving any openings and taking careful note of Herscherik’s condition after being kidnapped.

“You Highness, your primary butler will arrive this afternoon.”

Luke announced to Herscherik who was sipping his black tea after finishing breakfast.

“Eh, already?”

What fast work in already accomplishing this off the heels of yesterday, such that interviews and himself were not needed for the process?

(I wonder what kind of person will show up... or rather, would we get along well?)

His feelings of 20% hope and 80% insecurity were swallowed down with his tea.

A young man appeared together with Luke in the afternoon. His glossy, black hair was combed back and his eyes were dark red like rubies; if he smiled, women would surely blush.

“Well then, I shall take my leave here.”

Barely giving any explanation, Luke quickly left the room, acting like a matchmaker for a formal marriage interview. Silence dominated the distance placed between the two left behind.

(Um.....)

“Kuro?”

Kuro –the spy who had always wore pure black clothes, his bangs let down, an oversized hood to cover the area around his eyes, and a cloth to cover his mouth. Even though Herscherik shouldn't have known how his face looked like, he was confident that this man was Kuro.

“.....You're surprisingly handsome.”

“What do you mean by 'surprisingly'?”

Herscherik smiled at Kuro's objections, the ex-spy appearing as a primary butler. Previously, he had vaguely thought that Kuro might be handsome due to his otaku intuition, but this man was truly stunning.

“What happened? You're changing jobs to a butler?”

“.....Well, you know.”

Herscherik tilted his head, confused at how ambiguous the answer was even for Kuro.

(Like he's saying, 'Even I don't fully understand how it came to this.')

Aristocrats were merely a source of revenue when Kuro worked as a spy. So that was why he was fine being used by them for a fixed amount of time.

However, Herscherik was completely different from those people:

Proactive to investigate something by himself at night and even venturing outside when that proved insufficient —

Had a sense of responsibility since he had obligations as a member of the royal family

Stubborn as he would not sway once he had decided on something

Kind, placing precedence on others over himself

He was a prince overflowing with smiles, unlike the expressions Kuro fabricated for himself.

Before he became aware of it, he had become able to naturally express emotion.

When he did realize it, he had begun to look forward to meeting the prince:

Unease when he heard that the prince had disappeared.

The surge of anger he felt when he saw the prince's fallen form.

Relief when he rescued the prince.

He couldn't forget the prince's heart-wrenching expression when he resolved that he must separate from his nanny and deceive his father.

Kuro wanted to do something.

Kuro wanted to aid the prince in his endeavor to protect those he treasured.

Euphoria welled in his chest when the prince told him he was fine.

However, there was also insecurity.

Insecurity that Herscherik wanted his ability, not himself.

He was not originally from this country. Due to circumstances, he became a wanderer here.

There was no one who needed him. What they needed was the abilities of 'Shadow Fang.'

The prince had said this.

"Kuro is Kuro. Or are you saying that you saved me because I'm a prince?"

Kuro's answer was "No."

He probably wouldn't have acted even if he was the king of this country or even an employer.

Because he was Herscherik did Kuro act.

Herscherik also said that he needed 'Kuro,' not the 'Shadow Fang.'

Herscherik was the first person who genuinely needed him as a person.

"Yesterday, you said that I was fine, remember?"

Voicing his honest thoughts was too embarrassing for him, so Kuro opted to say that with a broad grin.

".....Thank you!"

Herscherik answered Kuro with a smile appropriate for one his age. But he immediately changed into a serious face.

"But Kuro, is your social status okay and everything?"

"Who knows? Well, I got a certificate from the king's primary butler, so isn't that fine?"

He had thought that he managed to infiltrate the palace completely unseen last night, but Luke appeared before him without him realizing it. And just like that, he was examined to become a primary butler.

Kuro couldn't judge whether this was Luke's own judgment or the king's suggestion. Nevertheless, as the king's primary butler deemed him acceptable, he realized that this man wasn't just an ordinary person.

"I see. Which reminds me, Kuro, do you actually not have a real name? It feels kind of weird to keep calling you 'Kuro.'"

"I dunno my real name. Well, I do have a name I get called, but it's probably bad if you used it."

He probably had one in the past, but a lot had happened, leading to him working

underground and being addressed as 'Shadow Fang'; as such, he decided that he no longer needed a name. Plus, there was no one close enough to him to call his name.

Being called 'Kuro' by Herscherik now fit him nicely. However, calling himself that in public might be bad.

"Give me one you like."

"Umm....."

Herscherik furrowed his eyebrows, deep in thought. Then, he clapped his hands.

"How does 'Schwartz' sound?"

"What does it mean?"

Kuro inquired about this word he had never heard before.

"Um, I think it means 'black.' Do you think it's too uninspired?"

Kuro laughed at Herscherik who tilted his head, unconfident. It was a very natural laugh.

"Great. My name is Kuro anyways, right?"

"Yeah!"

In this country, having a name bestowed upon oneself from someone of royalty had a special meaning attached to it.

That was unconditional faith from the one who bestowed the name and innocent loyalty of the receiver.

Being unaware of this meaning, the strained laughter they let out from embarrassment when they found out was something that would happen a little bit further down the line.

Chapter 7

Idle Talk –

The King, His Butler, and His Favorite Mistress

After Herscherik had left the room, the king of the Greisis Kingdom, Soleil, let out a deep sigh and sat down on the couch, his back sinking into it.

Despite being released from the tension that had plagued him since yesterday, he was assaulted by fatigue at the emergence of a new problem.

“That child really resembles her...”

Without thinking, the king grumbled a complaint. Standing in wait beside him was his butler, and childhood friend, shrugging his shoulders. He absolutely agreed with the king’s statement.

“Nah, rather than saying he resembles her, he exceeds her on that level, or even...”

Their memory of her was completely candid: the favorite mistress who was manlier than men. Of course, her manliness referred to her personality; her appearance was that of a lovely woman. It was just that whenever her masculine words and a boldness that would put any man to shame came flying out from that lovely appearance, it would make the two men’s brains stall.

“Hersche is, without a doubt, her child.”

Soleil placed a hand on his forehead and gave a strained laugh.

Herscherik’s appearance certainly did resemble hers, as well as his stubborn personality.

His disposition to never sway off the path he had decided and to never betray his core goals even if he made different decisions was inherited from his mother.

“Leaving aside the matter of Hersche for later... Luke, you were careless this time. If you weren’t you, I would have immediately made you regret living.”

Luke felt that the room's temperature had dropped numerous degrees. That was how cold Soleil's voice sounded.

Luke knew. He knew that his childhood friend and king, Soleil, was equal in terms of swordsmanship to a knight of the Imperial Guard and magical prowess to a top-ranking magician.

But it was just his personality that insisted he not flaunt this power.

"I'm sorry. It's not that you were careless, but who would've thought that Meria would be the one to do something so outrageous."

".....Very true. Meria had done something wrong."

Soleil believed that the reason behind the 7th prince's kidnapping was a blunder on his side.

Meria had come to petition to him about the suffering caused by the lord in her hometown. But Soleil couldn't grant her wish because there wasn't a single definitive proof in her words. He himself also wanted to strike a bargain with her, but there wasn't enough time.

Meria's overthinking led to the development of this incident.

He sympathized, but that didn't mean he had to forgive her. Even before doing something like kidnapping a member of the royal family, such behavior would cause the country to waver and shake its very foundation. That was why the punishment for this was heavier than necessary.

(Even though this won't change that man or what he does...)

That man towards whom the system was completely biased had taken Soleil's daughter away from him in the past—the minister and the ringleader; what he was doing and what Meria had done were not that different. Rather, Meria would be forgiven after looking at her reason with a sentimental perspective.

(If only I could get a hold on some evidence; anything really... then we could've continued life without it turning like this.....!)

This time was like the last time—if he had only held on more tightly, then this situation could have been avoided. Soleil gritted his teeth, drowning in self-hatred at the

numerous times he found himself powerless.

(Thanks to Hersche, this event can be closed without having to punish Meria. That's the only positive.)

Despite being the victim who suffered the most in this incident, Herscherik didn't confess a single detail, so it had been decided that this incident will close without having found the criminal.

Soleil had insistently asked, stating that it was Herscherik's duty as a prince to inform the king of anything that happened, but the boy didn't waver.

".....Soleil, to be honest. Prince Herscherik is not a normal child."

As his master sat silent in self-directed anger, Luke opened his mouth to speak.

Luke had concluded this from his observations approximately two years ago, while he was secretly guarding Herscherik.

The first time he noticed was right after the banquet celebrating the prince's 3rd birthday.

After Herscherik had proposed that he wanted to study, Luke arranged for teachers as per Soleil's direction.

Herscherik had no magical power or physical prowess, but he excelled across the board in his language and arithmetic studies. And after half a year, he progressed up to the point where he could read technical books that would be difficult for even an adult.

He would read for a whole day whenever he had time. That was something unthinkable for any other young child of 3 years. The young prince sitting on the sofa and reading among a mountain of books looked bizarre to Luke.

Additionally, the prince would disappear in the middle of the night.

After Meria appeared in tears and he had reported this matter to Soleil, Luke would immediately search every nook and cranny of the inner palace. But as soon as he was at a loss at the prince's disappearance, Herscherik would return to his bed with an innocent look.

On a different day, Luke decided to stealthily shadow the prince, watching him secretly

head towards the royal castle and slip into various bureaus to read numerous documents. After the prince had left, Luke looked at the document Herscherik had been most interested in—an invoice for an abnormal payment.

After the prince had proceeded to various bureaus and read a great variety of documents, he would brood for a while then head back to his room and sleep. He was living such a life.

When Luke had reported this to Soleil, the king reflected on this for a bit before deciding to let the prince do as he pleased. However, the king requested from Luke that he guard the prince without being discovered.

The biggest shock to Luke was when an intruder appeared. He didn't know what the intruder's intention was, but he had come into contact with the prince.

As expected, Luke tried to go in for the rescue, but the prince had managed to avoid danger and even get along with him.

Afterwards, Luke investigated the intruder, learning that he was the famous 'Shadow Fang', well known in the underground guild. As expected, he quietly reported this to Soleil in hopes of stopping the prince, but his master selfishly refused to relent.

Days passed. Luke worked as the king's close aide during the day and the prince's guard during the night. By the time he became accustomed to the prince's double life, the prince had managed to extend his range to the castle town.

(I might die one of these days from overworking.....)

No one could blame Luke for thinking so.

The prince displayed the same cleverness in the castle town, attracting the attention of a fruit seller couple, to whose store he would often go going there to play.

And it wasn't just the couple.

As the months rolled on, the prince integrated into the community and even the castle town inhabitants accepted him.

But, the prince was not there to fool around. It appeared that the prince was moving around the castle town in order to verify what he had discovered in his nightly investigations.

And at this time, while Luke reported to Soleil after coming back from the castle town, was when the kidnapping incident occurred, according to Meria. He had completely believed in Meria, but that went out the back door.

“Yeah, I know.”

Soleil smiled as he answered Luke.

“Hersche isn’t normal. But he is my and her child. Seeing that I’m this kind of person, there’s no way he could be normal.”

“Er, I believe so too, but that’s not really what I meant...”

Luke unintentionally agreed.

Soleil also understood that what Luke wanted to say wasn’t that.

Soleil’s adorable, and youngest, prince had no magical power or physical prowess, and compared to the other princes, his appearance was lacking in flowers.

However, Herscherik, with eyes brilliant like a kingfisher’s feathers and similar to Soleil’s own, saw everything without any obstructions. What the prince saw and how far the depths he reached, Soleil didn’t know.

“.....I had said to let Hersche be free.”

When Herscherik said he wanted to study, it seemed like he had chosen this of his own accord.

And as such, the prince acted with his own intentions in mind. As his father, Soleil had a vague feeling that it would surely be a thorny path. Naturally, he wanted to stop his son, and he should stop him, as the path his son had chosen probably had the highest probability of shortening the chooser’s life. But, Soleil couldn’t stop him.

As the son of, a woman he knew so well, his own wife, Soleil knew that the prince would not sway from his determination. Nevertheless, he was worried, resulting in having Luke guard his son.

(But, that might have to end.)

Herscherik had started walking his own path.

Soleil felt that this was a little too fast; his son was trying to go places where his hand

couldn't reach the boy anymore. But his son had done what he had said: he freely chose to do this.

"But, what should we do about his primary butler?"

Soleil furrowed his brow.

He couldn't count on any of the aristocrats. Practically all the ones he could trust had left the royal castle. No, actually, the minister forced them to leave. To bring them here may garner them some unexpected dangers.

"Isn't there someone he's close to who's alright?"

Luke smiled broadly.

"On top of being clever, having high combative abilities, and being unwilling to betray due to knowing the crookedness of the aristocrats, isn't there a pitiful black dog who has completely been captured by Prince Herscherik's charm?"

"Don't talk about someone's son like a wicked woman."

"Nah, the prince's actual personality is worse than a wicked woman."

A wicked woman is calculating, but the prince's actions were displayed upfront.

"To think that 'Shadow Fang', who seems more uncooperative than you or me, had fallen in a blink of an eye. It's ominous, huh."

Luke was similarly aware of the dangers.

He held his ground on account of being Soleil's primary butler, but when he heard that the prince had been kidnapped, his vision blacked for a second as if he was suffering from a hallucination.

Soleil far exceeded the top of the list in beauty in the royal family. Even a top-rated artist would have trouble expressing it. As such, his looks were enough to attract people to him.

However, Herscherik did not have such an appearance. He had something else that attracted people; perhaps it should be called 'charisma.' Moreover, the person himself didn't realize that he was naturally leaking it.

"At any rate, if the black dog is with him, it should be fine, right? I'll make sure it works

out well, so leave the rest to me.”

“Alright.”

Luke bowed, turning to face the door as he planned to leave the room. But before he left the room, he turned around to look at Soleil.

“You okay?”

“.....Yeah.”

It was a weak answer, but Luke heard it and left the room behind.



.....Luke, please. Protect him from those targeting him.”

These were the words left behind by that woman, the king’s favorite mistress and Luke’s friend, on her deathbed.

Back then, Luke only understood half of what she had said.

Doubt was written on his face, so she added this to her words.

“Soleil is kind. Kinder than anyone... He puts others before himself and sacrifices himself... He is always killing himself for others.”

The life of the woman who bore Soleil’s child continued to fade even through her words. But in spite of that, she persisted, speaking clearly.

“Soleil’s kindness sits right beside his fear. If he were to lose someone precious to him again, I’m sure that he would break and lose himself to that fear..... I have a feeling that anything and everything will be neglected, leading this country to ruin.”

Her words took Luke’s breath away.

Soleil was a gentle king.

To protect his family, he would continue to bear the dishonor in silence, even if it meant being looked down on by the aristocrats.

The horror of losing his family at 10 years old and his first born child at 20 eroded him.

Soleil was never expected to become king.

As the 3rd prince, there was the 1st prince, full of wisdom and courage, as well as the 2nd prince, who excelled in martial arts, before him. Soleil couldn't compete with the two in their specialties, and he never thought about doing so.

"I want to become a researcher to support father and my elder brothers in the future."

The Soleil who happily chatted with his childhood friend Luke like this in the past was nowhere to be seen now.

His esteemed father and brothers passed away due to the incurable illness that inflicted royalty, and Soleil was turned into a puppet king by the aristocrats. Even though he was an adult, it didn't change the fact that he was controlled like a child.

Nevertheless in the beginning, Soleil fought to carry out his duty. Together with Luke who had become his primary butler and the other primary knights and magicians beside him, he fought with the aristocrats, unconcerned what was happening outside of the stage.

At that time, he had a child with a legitimate princess consort he had married for political reasons. Even if this was an arranged marriage, Soleil treasured his wife and showered his love over his first born child, a daughter.

However, when the legitimate princess consort was pregnant with her next child, tragedy befell them. The first princess had fallen to the incurable illness that inflicted royalty.

After conversing alone with the minister, in which the man gave his condolences, Soleil had a complete change in his attitude, no longer wanting to oppose the aristocrats. His knights and magicians petitioned him over and over again, but the king wouldn't budge.

Afterwards, the knights and magicians had finally left Soleil's side. Who they wanted was a kind and strong king, not an empty, weak fool.

Luke also wondered if he should leave, but while he troubled over this, he was recommended by the king to leave. However, as his childhood friend, Luke understood. He knew that the king was trying to protect them, and for this, the king chose to remain alone on his throne.

For that reason, Luke wondered if he should leave, no matter what.

“Soleil is a gentle king. But if he ever experiences fear and despair again, I’m afraid he will no longer be able to remain a king.”

The woman’s words were a prediction.

But Luke understood that they weren’t just that but what would actually happen in the future.

“That’s why my child shall become a support for him. But, there is also the possibility of the reverse: he would be driven into the corner.”

The favored mistress tried to give him peace of mind with her smile, though faint, as she said.

“There’s no one else I can entrust this to but you. Protect Soleil..... and when the time comes, stop him.”

The woman, Luke’s friend and wife of his childhood friend, entrusted this to him and left the world.

Luke turned to look at the closed door. On the other side of it, his childhood friend was fighting his fear even at this moment.

If he were to relax for just a moment, those precious to him would disappear in the blink of an eye. That was why no matter how injured he became, he refused to cross his bottom line. He would continue to bear the weight of everything.

But what if he does cross that line? Luke wondered.

Then Luke would have to stop Soleil even if it costs him his life. That was what he had promised after all. But there were still things he could do before then.

(Prince Herscherik, I am certain that you will become a principal figure in our country’s future.)

This was not only for the king’s sake.

He felt that the woman had staked her life to leave this hope behind.

Regardless of what measures Luke must take, he has to ensure that the boy survives.

In order to take the first step for this, he left for the dark hallway.

After seeing Luke out, Soleil looked at his hands. He saw how pathetically his hand trembled when he held it out towards the light from the fireplace.

When he had heard that Herscherik was kidnapped, he felt as though he was imprisoned in ice.

He was chilled all the way down to the depths of his heart. If Herscherik had returned home in anything other than in the best possible condition, he wasn't sure that he could retain his sanity.

"Even if I am no longer here, my child will be, so you'll be alright."

Even now, Soleil could vividly recall the words she muttered as if talking to herself right before she died.

"He'll be beside you in my stead. I'm certain he will help you."

The woman said as she weakly smiled. It was a faint smile—the complete opposite of her usual, bright one.

"That's why... you'll be fine even if I'm not around. My child will be here..... I love you, Soleil. You're the one I love the most in this world. My beloved king....."

With those last words, the woman departed to the Garden in Heaven.

The child she left behind was beginning to resemble her more and more as he grew up. Soleil did adore his other children, but he loved Herscherik the most. That might have been his reaction towards the grief he felt for losing that woman.

"But you know, children grow....."

Soleil muttered.

Presently, the youngest prince surpassed the older princes only in terms of his inner self.

While he felt some kind of loneliness, he was happy nevertheless.

(I was supposed to protect him, but before I realized it, it seems like I could be the one being protected.)

He recalled the youngest prince from just a moment ago.

He acted stubborn without confessing anything, and his eyes looked as if he was fully intent on pursuing his goal.

Who stood before Soleil was no longer an unsteady baby but a prince who had begun to walk his own path with his own legs. The only remaining thing he could do as a parent was to watch over their child.

“If he’s your child, it should be fine, right...”

He persuaded himself.

That woman was strong. She propelled herself forward without fearing anything. She was the woman who supported him, the king who only felt fear, struggling in fear from the agony he felt, even as he stood still.

But that woman had already departed.

“Still...”

The king muttered and looked at his hand that had stopped shaking.

“I wonder what would have happened if I had lost Hershe.”

He was pleased with Herscherik’s growth. He wanted to offer him help.

But, he also wanted to lock the prince in a cage to protect him, to prevent anyone from touching him.

Conflicting feelings clashed and ran rampant inside of Soleil.

He murmured the name of his favorite mistress, clinging to it desperately in the hope

that its owner might save him once again.

Chapter 8

Prince, Butler, and Trap

One week had passed between the kidnapping incident and when nanny Meria would leave the imperial capital for her hometown.

It was a week packed full of preparations for Herscherik, along with a trip down to the castle town to meet the fruit-selling couple after he heard from Kuro that they were worried about him.

The fruit seller couple felt relieved that Herscherik was safe, as if he was their own child. Of course the husband was as unsociable as usual, but still he used his large hand to roughly ruffle Herscherik's hair.

When he was questioned as to why he hadn't come, he answered that he had a headache, fever, and dizziness so he rested just in case. When he said this, he was presented with baked sweets by Louise and for some reason, a teddy bear from the husband.

As he accepted the presented sweets and bear, he noticed the husband's ears turn slightly red and thought, "Ah, will I be done in by this gap moe!" as he sympathized with Louise.

With the preparations completed, the formation of the prince's party consisted of a carriage carrying Herscherik in the front and another, carrying Meria and the luggage, in the back.

To their left and right, were 25 members of the country's elite squadron of Imperial Guards, including the Squadron Commander and the coachman for the carriage, who both served the royal family as bodyguards.

Inside the guarded carriage, the cute, angelic face of the prince was currently warped in pain.

"Kuro, are we there yet?"

He weakly asked his primary butler Schwartz, aka Kuro, riding inside the carriage together with him.

Looking at his master in such a state, Kuro let out a sigh and in spite of being a retainer,

answered with an irritated expression.

“Hersche, I’ve heard you ask the same thing 10 minutes ago. You know that we still have a week left, right?”

The journey to reach the nanny Meria’s hometown was approximately two weeks. However, they were only halfway there.

“Uuuu, Kuro is being cold hearted. And I feel sick.”

Saying so, Herscherik stuffed his face into the mountain of cushions.

“Why does it have to sway so much...”

“Because it’s a carriage.”

Kuro’s words were like a sword that sliced through Herscherik’s complaints.

Herscherik was presently the highest ranking person in this whole march, and he was suffering from motion sickness.

(If I remember correctly, I was also weak when I rode in vehicles in my past life.....)

Whenever Ryouko rode in a vehicle she wasn’t driving herself, she would almost certainly feel sick. In both normal trains and the bullet train, she would become queasy. And it was a given that she felt it even more on roller coaster-type machines. Whenever she had to travel far distances, she would set up an alarm on her phone the moment she boarded and head off to dreamland—her only defense against the sickness.

But, this defense mechanism proved to be difficult inside the carriage as it traveled on the unpaved road.

“Hersche, here, some water.”

“Thanks.....”

Kuro held out a canteen. Even though he said such stuff, Herscherik felt appreciative to his caring primary butler and said his thanks as he accepted the canteen.

Kuro becoming his primary butler and taking care of Herscherik’s needs and wants had given the prince numerous surprises.

Kuro had shown, from his table manners to conversational etiquette and office work

to self-defense skill, all the necessary skills for a butler in such a natural manner that anyone would judge him to be impeccable.

“Well, being a spy isn’t just about sneaking around.”

This was Kuro’s answer when Herscherik asked why he was such an adept butler. In other words, infiltrating at night was not his only job as a spy.

If in an aristocrat’s mansion, he would be a servant. A cafe, a waiter. And if need be, he would a male prostitute in a brothel. All of this to gather information. It was his job to integrate into the setting, behave naturally, and cleverly manipulate conversations to get the information he needed.

Naturally, fights might break out, so he trained his physical strength to that higher than any thug in the area. Herscherik guessed that Kuro may even be stronger than the Imperial Guards escorting them right now.

He had accomplished his requests up until now by freely using every skill at his disposal, and he became the presence he was now from these accomplishments.

(What high specs...)

Herscherik thought as he buried himself in the mountain of cushions.

Everyone around him was too high-spec. Why was he the only one with nothing? He couldn’t help but feel this sense of defeat over and over again since coming to this world.

Herscherik was tormented by his own worthlessness and the motion sickness for a week before he was finally able to step foot in Meria’s hometown, the land that once belonged to Count Luzeria.

“Welcome, Your Highness Herscherik!”

It was evening when they arrived at their destination.

Greeting them in front of the lord’s mansion in the evening was the one who incriminated the land’s former lord, Count Grimm alongside all his servants. The servants stood in front of the mansion, and it was quite the sight to see them all lined up, with the exception of Count Grimm, with heads all lowered at the same angle.

Still, Count Grimm had his own type of presence.

His clothes were of the highest grade and wrapped in fur. Gold, silver, and jeweled rings were placed on his fingers. His stomach was also jutting out a bit more than the last time Herscherik had seen him. Obviously living the good life, Grimm's skin had a glossy sheen. Incidentally, the hair on his head had become a bit thinner since the last time Herscherik laid eyes on him.

(Would've been better if you'd become a little bit more bald.)

Without throwing up such a thought outside his mind, Herscherik showed the perfect, princely smile.

"Count Grimm, thank you for accommodating this sudden visit."

To the prince's adorable smile, both the female and male servants standing in a line in the back let out a sigh.

"Oh no, it must have been difficult during your journey. Did monsters show up?"

Grimm asked with worry in his voice. In response, Herscherik's smile turned into an uneasy expression as he answered.

"We encountered them many times. This was the first time I've seen them."

Along the two week journey, they were attacked by monsters—animals transformed into rage-filled existences with magical power. Watching these monsters from the carriage window was as frightful as a certain horror game.

One creature they encountered was a wolf-shaped monster; its black fur and blood-colored eyes both had a dangerous shine to them, and its size could easily exceed his body's size. According to Kuro, the monster's physique and physical ability evolved levels above those of any wild animal thanks to the magical power absorbed in its body.

In order for the monsters to strengthen their physical and magical power, they preyed on those with higher magical power than them. As they generally targeted humans, the country's Order of Knights periodically dispatched units to various places to suppress these monsters. The local lords also hired mercenaries for suppression as well.

Though with that being said, the monsters' intelligence was no different from that of

any wild beast, so they didn't pose that much of a threat even when they swarmed together. Occasionally, strong monsters called hellions appeared, but they were treated like pests to be controlled by humans.

The swarm of monsters that attacked Herscherik's party was barely a challenge for the Imperial Guards who defeated them in a blink of an eye. But when Herscherik recalled the scene from that time, he felt a bit nauseous.

(Guess they really don't disappear into light like in games.)

Herscherik grew tired from recollecting that scene.

The Imperial Guards threw the defeated monsters to the edge of the road and into the forest, but it was still as grotesque as in horror games.

In his past life, Ryouko was a heavy gamer, but the only genre she didn't dive into was horror games.

There was a time when she reluctantly played one because it was recommended, but she had a two-fold scary nightmare of skeleton soldiers chasing her with weapons and invoices.

Incidentally, the numbers on the invoices were too detailed, causing her to check if she forgot any payments at work the next day. This narrow escape from death could only be due to this horror game and the skeletons.

"I was really surprised as I've never come across such in the imperial capital."

"Yes, I see. I'm most grateful that Your Highness is safe. It's already this late. As you must be tired, please find repose in the villa I've prepared for you."

Grimm pointed to a building that stood up on a hill past the woods.

"Imperial Guards, please, this way as well. I have prepared a modest banquet tonight. The preparations should be completed around 6 o'clock, so please head to the dining hall then."

"6 o'clock, is it?"

Herscherik pulled the pocket watch from his pocket and checked the time. Looking at it, it appeared to have just turned 4 o'clock.

"In that case, I will escort my nanny to her house then. I'll probably make it in time, right..... Count?"

When he looked at the responseless count, the man's face had completely changed into a pale one.

Observing the instantaneous change of facial color, like that of a litmus paper, Herscherik tilted his head to the side.

"What's wrong?"

"Noth-nothing! It was nothing. Please, have a safe trip!"

The man panicked and glossed over the issue. Herscherik held on to his suspicions as he signaled to Kuro with a look.

Kuro only smiled and gave an elegant bow in acknowledgment. Immediately afterwards, he called to the Imperial Guard commander, arranging for half of the soldiers to load the luggage from the carriage and head to the villa.

And with that done, he escorted Hersche and Meria into the carriage and borrowed a horse from one of the soldiers.

He mounted the horse so brilliantly that Count Grimm's servants all clamored around, although it was different from when they reacted to Herscherik. Of course, this was limited to the women in the case of Kuro.

The carriage began to move and the scenery from the window turned into that of private houses and rolling fields.

However, there were hardly any human movements in them. Moreover, even though this was around the middle of autumn, the fields were barren with just a few fruits.

"Meria, did the harvest already end for this area?"

Although his nanny had become quite awkward around him since the incident, Herscherik asked her in his usual manner.

"...No. Originally, the time to harvest wheat should still be underway, but this year's climate has been poor, leading to crop failure. Or so I have heard from my parents."

In other words, what could be harvest had already been harvested.

And when he asked for more details, she continued: the river flooded and washed away the fields due to a storm this summer, and there were continual stretches of days filled with droughts.

If there was at least some kind of flood control, there wouldn't have been any damage, but the count was negligent.

This land was infertile from the very beginning. Their harvest yielded slightly less compared to other region, and they clearly understood that if they didn't properly perform, this would be the result.

Herscherik recalled the documents he had searched before coming here.

There certainly were crop failures, so they were supposed to be relieved of their tax payment and granted subsidiary aid from the country. But by looking at their local lord's frivolous manners, one could imagine that that money wasn't being used for the right reasons. Going even farther, the lord was supposed to deal with the issue at hand by equally distributing the emergency rations. The original purpose of the subsidiary money was to support areas of the country hit by a great disaster.

"Master Herscherik?"

Herscherik's face had become bleaker so Meria called out to him, uneasy. Startled, he showed a smile to reassure her and glossed over the situation.

Meria's family lineage appeared to be composed of farmers. Her house was inferior when compared to the local lord's mansion, but it was still a considerably large house. Her family was probably notified of their arrival beforehand as Meria's parents were standing in front of the entranceway when the carriage arrived at their home. Their bodies were thin, most likely due to their recent hardships—the complete opposite of the count.

"Your Highness, there is no possible excuse we can give for the terrible trouble our daughter and relatives have caused you."

The two of them briefly greeted Herscherik as he disembarked the carriage, and they lowered their heads so much that it looked like their body would break.

It seemed that they were aware of the situation and thought the reason why their daughter could return home alive after having done such a thing was thanks to the prince.

Being apologized to all of a sudden caused Herscherik to hurriedly look around, but luckily, Kuro thought ahead and sent the soldiers to patrol the surrounding area. As such, the subject matter of this conversation wasn't heard by them, allowing Herscherik to feel relieved.

“Umm... I’m a bit cold, so is it alright if we go inside?”

Herscherik faked a shiver.

A family member was usually the one to do the invitation, but Herscherik worried that the two parents would remain prostrated on the ground underneath this cold sky indefinitely.

While they composed themselves by the fireplace, Herscherik listened to their story. It appeared that after Meria’s cousins escaped the imperial capital, they immediately relayed to the parents the things they did, the things they were trying to do, and about Herscherik, along with their apologies.

“Your Highness, if punishment is truly necessary, then the responsibility should fall onto us, the ones in charge of them. Please, I ask that you pardon the young ones. Do with us as you see fit.”

Meria’s father once again deeply bowed his head, but Herscherik shook his head. It appeared that they misunderstood this as him coming all the way here to punish them.

“The reason why I have come here was not to punish them, or you for that matter. It was because they sought help, so I have come here to fulfill my duty as a member of the royal family..... It must have been hard since Count Luzeria’s death.”

Herscherik said and took out the beautiful, old silver pocket watch for them to see. When they laid their eyes on it, they were surprised and their eyes became watery with tears. That just went to show how much they adored Count Luzeria.

“I’m sorry for bringing up bitter memories. I will definitely do something about your situation.”

Herscherik said, and they responded with numerous nods without any words.

This was the first time Herscherik had seen a town besides that of the castle town. Taking into consideration his position as prince and his physical condition, adequate lodging was chosen for him. Herscherik felt uncomfortable with all the treatment he had received wherever he went, but something else was currently on his mind.

It would be accurate to say that the citizens around the country openly displayed warm welcomes to him.

However, there was fear reflected in their eyes as well as cold looks of scorn.

He felt that these looks that were directed at him were most likely the same ones they gave to the other members of the royal family.

(Everything'll turn to naught at this rate.)

Meria, her parents and family in front of him, as well as the cold looks from the people made him painfully aware of the need for an existence who must protect the country.

Their cries of pain would never reach the royal castle. As there was someone obstructing all of this from happening. By someone, he meant the local lord, government officials, even aristocrats—the Minister's faction.

They cleverly disguised their crimes as they worked to protect their own gains.

A country exists solely for their people; citizens allow their treasured country to flourish. So, a country that rebuffs its citizens will fall.

To recover the citizens' trust. Herscherik understood that words such as 'hardships' would not be enough to express the trial that lay before him. He leaned forward, his chest heavy.



The "modest banquet" Count Grimm had prepared for Herscherik looked more like an "extremely extravagant banquet" to its intended guests.

The dishes lined up in front of their eyes were prepared from the highest quality ingredients, and their quantity was so great that even Herscherik wouldn't be able to eat them all.

Herscherik sat opposite of Grimm on the long table, thankful of the distance placed between the them.

Simply looking at the way Grimm vigorously stuffed the presented food into his stomach, Herscherik felt his belly too was soon full. The man was also eating with his mouth open, causing anyone beside him to certainly lose their appetite.

And even without that happening, the fatty dishes were more damaging to the tired

Herscherik's stomach than delicious. He had actually brought some of it to Kuro's mouth to test for poison, but as expected, Kuro couldn't stomach it and quickly gave up on eating.

After the meal was done, Herscherik and the others were greeted and lead to their individually prepared rooms in the villa.

The villa was composed of three floors with the most extravagant room on the 3rd floor. The 2nd and bottom floor would be used by the Imperial Guards while the 3rd floor would be only for the prince and his butler. It was also decided that the Imperial Guards would take turns as bodyguards throughout the night.

Although it was mid-autumn, it was still chilly, so a fire was prepared in the fireplace, making the inside of the room toasty.

The instant Herscherik looked at the pocket watch, it had just turned to 11 o'clock, and the local lord's mansion could be seen from the window. Almost all of the lights in that mansion were out.

After confirming this, Herscherik vigorously got up and stood in front of the fireplace.

"Well then, I'm heading out."

"No, wait there. Where do you think you're going?"

Herscherik put on his coat so naturally that Kuro had to retort without a moment to lose.

"Eh? You know, like evidence gathering?"

He tilted his head in a cute manner, causing Kuro to look up at the sky.

It went without saying that Kuro strongly wanted to pressure Herscherik with questions, wondering how the prince possibly came up with the thought of needing to go out alone without a single consideration to Kuro's presence here with him

"Why do you think I'm here? Just wait here patiently."

".....Eeeeh."

Although Kuro thought that he could see traces of dissatisfaction on Herscherik's face, he silently placed his hand on the boy's head.

"Do not, under any circumstances, leave. In fact, just go to sleep."

“Ow, owowowow.”

Kuro gripped Herscherik’s skull so painfully that once the prince was released, he crouched down, holding his head.

“You know I’m more or less your boss right now, sheesh.”

Kuro gave a sarcastic laugh to the prince’s muttering, and after a flawless bow, exited the room. Naturally, he did so without making a single noise with his footsteps or from closing the door.

(I guess it’ll be fine since he’s Kuro...)

He was a former master spy after all. Herscherik believed that everything would work out fine. But there was still some unease.

Herscherik was told to get some rest, but he decided to wait until Kuro returned as he took the blanket from his bed. Even though the room was somewhat warm from the fire, it was still chilly.

(I don’t wanna catch a cold.)

With the blanket wrapped around him, Herscherik sat on the sofa and watched the flames flickering in the fireplace. But he couldn’t stay awake.

Herscherik was tired from the journey and dozed off after only a few minutes.

“Ryouko, you’ll catch a cold if you fall asleep in the kotatsu!”

Her head... wasn’t slapped. Instead she was kicked awake.

It appeared that she somehow returned to her parent’s home, got inside the kotatsu while playing her mobile game, and then fell asleep. After kicking her eldest daughter’s head, Ryouko’s mother headed to the kitchen, spouting complaints.

It was fortunate that today was Ryouko’s birthday, so she wasn’t told to help out. That was also why even though her family saw Ryouko’s lazy behavior after coming home just past noon as problematic, no one pointed it out.

When she restarted the game at the point where her phone went to sleep, the handsome capture target she was aiming for this time appeared on screen.

“Mufufu.”

The muffled laughter coming out of Ryouko’s mouth would make anyone who heard it cringe.

(I was right to buy this otome game!)

Ryouko checked the protagonist’s stats on the game screen. It displayed the player-insert protagonist’s status and the current progress towards the capture target. Today’s otome game had a plethora of routes to take, so as a gamer, Ryouko felt a bit annoyed.

(Well, this would be just right for those who only want to replenish their fill of moe.)

As such, this otome game was a perfect match for the unsatisfied Ryouko.

After choosing and raising one of the three heroines as the protagonist, you work to grow intimate with the capture target. If your stats aren’t enough, you can’t trigger events and same for if you make the wrong choices.

There were 20 capture targets. The voice actors ranged from bigwigs to up-and-coming newbies in the otome gaming world. Moreover, there were three possible endings for each and every one of the capture targets. Looking at these features, you could catch a glimpse of the sincerity of the otome game’s production company.

Ryouko had heard that a secret capture target would appear after capturing all the others, so she would play the game whenever she had time.

“.....Big sis, gross.”

“Ah, welcome home~.”

The middle sister looked down at Ryouko, fed up with her older sister just simmering inside the kotatsu.

“Auntie!”

“Oh, welcome~”

Ryouko’s niece, still in elementary school, popped her head out from behind her mother and waved her hand.

The sister’s husband was also behind her and gave a quick bow. In response, Ryouko

quickly fixed her seated posture and returned a bow back.

“Even though we came here to congratulate you, why are you flattening into a sea lion...”

“Huh, is it already time?”

When she looked at the clock on the wall, it was already past 3:30. The plan was to have an early dinner and start the party at 4 o’clock.

At that moment, a voice calling out, “I’m home~” echoed out from the entranceway. Her mother’s voice replying, “You guys. It’s not ‘I’m home,’ but ‘Hello!’ You’ve already gone and married out!” could be heard. Apparently the youngest daughter had also arrived.

“I’m home, sister. Came to celebrate your Arafou¹!”

“Sha-up.”

The youngest sister laughed. Her husband could also be seen hurrying in behind her. The youngest sister, whose age was quite far from Ryouko’s, had gotten married two years ago. Her husband was only one year younger than Ryouko. This age-gap couple hadn’t really come to grips with their marriage, and this was a bit worrying.

“You two, help out! Son-in-laws, make yourselves at home.”

At the mother’s call, everyone simultaneously began to move.

With only the niece left, Ryouko beckoned her with her hand. The child obediently followed and entered the kotatsu.

“...So, have you been getting along with your dad and mom?”

The niece answered her with silence.

Ryouko produced a bitter smile at her niece’s behavior. It appeared that the rebellious years have coming earlier in this generation. When Ryouko was around that age, she was a momma’s girl, sticking close behind her mother like a puppy.

When her middle sister was born, she had followed her mother’s words, “The big sister has to protect the younger one, okay?”

But in fact, it was the thought of *‘Big sister’...Ah, that has nice ring to it!* that she recalled getting excited about.

“...Mom gets angry right away. And Dad’s annoying.”

“Oh my, oh my.”

Ryouko shrugged her shoulders. Was this how the children of today talked?

“Hey, you know, your mom gets upset because she loves you. If she didn’t love you, she wouldn’t even bother. Of course, you know this more than I do, right? Also, it’s not good to call you dad annoying. Your dad’s working really hard for you so you can eat food, wear nice clothes, and go to school.”

When Ryouko persuaded her, the niece knit her eyebrows. Even if she did realize all of this, she was still at a rebellious age.

Ryouko waved her hand quickly, beckoning the child closer. When the girl approached, Ryouko held her face between her hands. She looked directly at her niece, face-to-face, to prevent her from turning away.

“Your mom and dad are humans, so there are things they don’t like. There will be times when these things will strongly affect you too. That’s why be more mature, and I’ll help you with those two. Hey, promise Auntie. Don’t go calling your dad and mom annoying, okay?”

Because Ryouko sandwiched the girl’s face between her hands, she couldn’t run away. Finally, the niece resigned and nodded after pondering for a bit.

“Uh huh, such a good kid. As expected of my wonderful niece.”

Ryouko said as she released her.

“...I wish Auntie was my mom...”

“Oh no no, it’s because I’m your aunt I can say such things. Aunts have the special privilege that they can dote on their nieces. But it’s different for parents. They have a duty to raise their children. If you were my child, I would worry, get angry every day, and nag.”

No responsibility laid on her.

What her niece will become in the future laid entirely on the parents’ shoulders. That was why the only thing she could do was dote. Rather, if she went any further, she would be butting her nose where it shouldn’t be. The preaching words she just gave

may also be considered butting in.

“Go ahead and ask your mom. Ask her how Auntie was when she was little. I’m sure she’d say I was really naggy.”

It was Ryouko’s duty to lecture her sisters on every little thing they did.

Their parents would scold them, but the existence of an older sister who would repeatedly lecture them for hours on end was more likely to be bothersome for the younger sisters.

Additionally, this older sister would mix in her own experiences, repeat the story over and over again, then unknowingly stray away from the topic of the lecture, and in the end, break down crying.

Recalling that now, she was very annoying. Or more precisely, this was a worrisome dark history of hers she wished to be sealed.

“Alright, I’m going to the bathroom for a sec.”

Leaving her niece behind in the kotatsu, Ryouko stood up and entered the corridor. There, her brothers-in-law were eavesdropping. When their eyes met, the two men gave a bitter laugh.

“...Sorry ’bout my kid.”

“Raising a child is hard work, huh? If anything happens, let me know. She’s my cute niece, and since you guys are family and my younger brothers now, feel free to rely on me.”

The middle sister’s husband looked at her apologetically, so Ryouko slapped him on his shoulders. Beside him, the youngest sister’s husband opened his mouth.

“We’re gonna have a kid soon. We don’t know the gender yet, but... um, I’m in your care.”

“Oh hoh, congrats! Now isn’t the time to be celebrating my Arafou then, right!”

While this conversation was happening, they were called from the living room. It appeared that the preparations were complete. The niece shut off the power to the kotatsu and turning the corner of the corridor, she bumped into her father and made an awkward face. However, Ryouko patted her niece’s head and hurried her ahead. Her brothers-in-law followed as she tried to make herself the last one to enter the

room. There, her father was waiting with a glass of wine in his hand.

“Aaha, this is paradise.”

Ryouko muttered exactly how she felt.

She didn't have any relationships, but she was blessed with a growing family and being able to quietly spend each day. She thought, 'Surely this calming time would never end'.

When she incidentally looked at the garden, her beloved dog Kuro was wagging his tail. She would have to take him out on a walk later on.

“.....Kuro?”

However, Kuro's body transformed into that of a young man in a second. A young man with eyes dark red like rubies.

With that, Ryouko realized that this was a dream.

This was the future she had wanted before reincarnating into this world when she died.

“I know, Kuro.”

She looked at herself.

Her body was no longer that of Hayakawa Ryouko, but Herscherik Greisis, 7th prince of the Greisis Kingdom.

Herscherik headed towards the entranceway, directly passing the living room.

That was because *he* was waiting.

When Herscherik opened the door, the man was there waiting for him, smiling. He gave Herscherik an elegant bow.

“I'm heading out.”

Just before Herscherik left the entranceway, he turned around.

Ryouko's entire family was there and they saw him off with a smile.

1. *This an abbreviation for "around 40. " Ryouko is turning 35 here, so I couldn't really think of slang to encompass this concept.*



Herscherik woke to the midsummer humidity.

However, even though his eyes were open, his vision was not completely clear. Rather, it was cloudy, like he was engulfed in smoke. No, this wasn't a simile; the room really was filled with smoke.

"No way, a fire!?"

Herscherik was about to fall into a state of panic, but in a brief moment, his state went past panic into being calm and collected.

This was the result of his previous life's training. The area Ryouko lived in was prone to natural disasters, so Herscherik could easily recall, even now, the time she was in elementary school where the principal's sincere scolding would come flying out of his mouth at the students who couldn't care less about safety drills.

The always calm principal would strongly admonish the students lined up in the schoolyard.

"If there really was a fire this time, half of you students would be dead. If you can't do it during practice, there's no way you can do it during the real thing!"

He would make them redo the practice from the very beginning.

If they couldn't reach the destination within the evacuation time limit, they had to do it again. If the principal find anyone unnecessarily chatting, everyone had to do it again. A satisfied smile finally appeared on the principal's face when he saw the large number of students no longer uselessly chatting and now standing in a line formation. He gesticulated.

"As expected of my school's students. Most certainly, all of you here will not be negligent when a real disaster hits."

Thanks to such an elementary school experience, safety drills were the only thing

taken seriously to this day.

If the lower grades were going to pointlessly chatter, the higher grades would warn them, so the lower grades accurately followed the higher grades' example. The image of everyone cooperating in the safety drill was continually passed down from alma mater to the newer generation.

The composure Herscherik had cultivated from that time allowed him to regain himself, and he dropped down to the ground.

During a fire, smoke accumulates in the upper area of the room, meaning that breathable air would be in the lower half. He wanted to avoid inhaling in the smoke and falling unconscious at all costs.

Herscherik crawled on the floor and headed for the door.

When he finally reached it, it refused to move, as if something was holding it closed.

(No way. Was I set up?)

The question of who it could be didn't even appear in his mind.

He had easily anticipated that someone would target his life. The person with the highest possibility was that Count Grimm.

Still on the floor, Herscherik looked at the pocket watch. It wasn't that late at night yet.

(Was he aware that evidence was being gathered?... No, this would be too fast of a reaction.)

Besides, it was unthinkable that Kuro, who had managed to easily infiltrate the royal castle, would make such a mistake.

(Is this like a *Driven into a corner; nothing left to do* situation?)

The flames have already breached the middle of the room. Even if he tried to escape through the window, getting out by himself from the 3rd floor was impossible.

'Do not leave this room.'

He recalled that man's words.

He had said so. Therefore, Herscherik made up his mind to stay.

He grabbed the blanket, not yet burned, and used the pocket watch's magic to create water.

He patted himself on the back for memorizing what kind of magic he could do with the pocket watch in this time of need.

The amount of water he could create by utilizing the wandering magical power was enough for a single drink, but definitely not enough to put out a fire of this degree. But, he could at least soak the blanket.

Herscherik wore the soaked blanket over himself and crawled over to the unburned area of the room with the least amount of flammable objects.

(Kuro, I'm waiting for you.)

Herscherik resolved himself; he placed the wet blanket near his mouth and curled up as tightly as he could while he waited.

But fiery hands were already creeping towards him.

By the time Kuro noticed the ruckus in the villa, he had already found the documents to be used for evidence.

There was a mountain pile of documentary evidence in the study he infiltrated. He chose the best among them that followed Herscherik's specifications and stuffed it in the inner pocket of his jacket. Infiltrating this mansion easier job than he had expected, with there being insufficient guards and no barrier. As he was about to leave, he looked out the window and saw the hill with the villa surrounded in a red light.

The instant he noticed this anomaly, Kuro immediately sprang into motion. He threw open the window and jumped out without hesitation. He grabbed on to the branch of a nearby tree, swinging around it like a gymnast on a horizontal bar, and landed on top of it. He quickly pulled out his knife, stabbed the trunk, and jumped down.

Because the knife was still in the tree, his falling speed slowed, and he touched down on the ground, soundlessly. As soon as he landed, he rushed towards the hill with the villa. Weaving through the forest of trees, his speed didn't drop in the slightest.

For a brief moment, the sound of something slicing through the air resounded.

Kuro hid behind a tree smoothly, as though it was simply reflex and he hadn't heard that faint sound. In the next moment, two arrows, one after the other, pierced the tree's trunk.

"To dodge this, as expected of the illustrious 'Shadow Fang'."

".....Who are you?"

From behind the tree, Kuro scanned his surroundings, searching for the voice's owner.

(How do they know I'm 'Shadow Fang'?)

As if to mock the vigilant Kuro, a man appeared out from a tree's shadow, tall, thin, and gloomy.

Kuro was certain he had seen this man before, several times in the underground guild, but it was only in passing, and they never talked to each other.

"Don't make such a strange face. You're already famous underground, y'know? They say that 'Shadow Fang' disappeared. Most of folks think that you've already kicked the bucket and stuff... Well, I thought so too..."

The man said and snorted.

"If I hadn't gone and paid the information broker, I would've never noticed that the 7th prince's primary butler and 'Shadow Fang' were one in the same. So, how'd you manage to weasel your way up there?"

His words were painted with envy. Envious that a man, who could only live underground, was now standing on the front stage.

(Tch, I should've silenced the information broker.)

Kuro silently clicked his tongue and revised his thinking.

The information broker will sell information as long as you provided money. They sold it fairly to anyone. It didn't matter if the buyer was an aristocrat, an ordinary citizen, or a criminal.

"You gonna chase after me?"

“Nah, even I don’t have that much free time to do so. It’s just that another request told me to find and take you in. I didn’t know the full details, so I went and bought info from the information broker. Well, if the contents of the info were really true, then me and the client are gonna be in a pinch, so we struck a deal that I don’t gotta bring you in.”

Kuro wondered about how much confidentiality was being handled within this contract, but seeing his opponent break this rule revealed that he probably realized how dangerous of a situation he had put himself into.

While this had nothing to do with the Kuro of the present, it was still sickening to hear of this disloyalty.

(When I get back, I’ll have to erase all traces of ‘Shadow Fang’.)

Or else, it was quite obvious that this would bring misfortune to Herscherik in the distant future.

“So, my current employer just hired us to scare the folks here... Anyway, do you understand why I told ya this much?”

The man grinned broadly. Kuro also understood the meaning of this. He sensed several people surrounding him.

(They number 15, eh?)

Their weapons shone in the light of the moon.

“Our employer said that he wants that prince to disappear. The villa’s already a sea of flames. If we stall ya here or kill ya, we’ll get a special reward for it. I mean, if we can kill ‘Shadow Fang’, we’ll increase in value, y’know.”

The man was confident in his victory, but Kuro looked at him with emotionless eyes. This was the face he had whenever he did this kind of work.

“...You’re the ones who shouldn’t be underestimating.”

Was Kuro, the man once feared as ‘Shadow Fang’, purposely being submissive, allowing his opponents to run their mouths and surround him?

The only reason for him to do so was that he wanted information.

To identify the idiot who would do such a foolish thing.

“You know they say that dead men tell no tales.”

Now that Kuro had the information he wanted, these guys had served their purpose.

The emotionless Kuro scoffed.

This cruel smile was one that he would never show Herscherik.

Chapter 9

Deception, Deal, and Vessel

“Search for His Highness Herscherik immediately!”

Intently watch the burning villa from afar, Count Grimm ordered his subordinates. He saw them off as they hurriedly forged their way towards the villa before returning back to his mansion with a dark expression and heavy footsteps.

The servants exchanged glances with one another, concerned for their master’s mental well-being.

If something were to happen to the king’s dearly beloved prince on his land, the responsibility of this blunder would fall on no one else but the count.

Realizing this, the servants understood why the count’s footsteps had become heavy. And if their master, the count, lost his standing, they would be at the risk of losing their jobs.

A dark expression appeared on their faces as they let out a sigh.

Separated from his servants, Count Grimm continued with heavy footsteps to his study, closing the door behind him.

The fire in the villa had already subsided, but half of the Imperial Guards who had escorted the prince on his journey had perished. Although the prince’s remains were yet to be found among the line-up of victims, there was little hope for his survival.

“Yes, I did it! Ahahahahaha!”

Maybe because he felt a sense of security from being alone in his room, or he just didn’t care that Count Grimm raised his voice in ridicule.

He had employed thugs to assassinate the prince, and he was certain that his own skin was saved.

This was his planned scenario:

The villa the prince was staying at was invaded by robbers. After they pillaged it for money and goods, they set it on fire. As for the Imperial Guards, they were too exhausted from traveling and possibly had drifted off into deep slumber, so they were unable to rescue the prince from the fire in time. Thus, he unfortunately died.

(Serving the Imperial Guards drugged food was a success.)

For the elite Imperial Guards to be defeated without any resistance would have added some unnatural and suspicious quality to the story. That was why he chose to mix the precise amount of drugs in so that they wouldn't detect it, instead believing the effects to be exhaustion.

As expected, the knights attributed the effects as exhaustion from the trip. They were careless as they were remiss during their nighttime patrol, allowing the thugs to easily deal with them.

(*That man* would deal with the prince for me. The aristocrats' response may be annoying, but this prince has no supporters.)

If the prince had a mother who was the princess of an allied nation like the 1st prince, or he had married a daughter of an affluent aristocrat like the other princes, this wouldn't have proceeded as smoothly.

However, regardless of whether or not the prince had anyone supporting him, if a member of the royal family were to have an accident and lose their life, it would become a grave situation.

But Grimm was a member of the great aristocratic faction, the Minister's faction. The minister and the surrounding aristocrats had made various preparations for such an event.

Count Grimm had concluded that if he were to implore *that man*, he would silence everything, like how he had done so with the previous count.

"Though I would have never imagined the prince's butler to be 'Shadow Fang'....."

There was no one part of the underground who wasn't familiar with that name. Grimm had frequently employed the underground guild, so he knew of the man's existence, but because the cost was astronomically large, Grimm never hired him.

Since one of the thugs he hired to intimidate those on his land had brought such

information to him, he was able to take measures against the spy.

“I’m saved!”

Count Grimm clenched both of his hands into fists. If he could, he would have a celebratory glass of the finest alcohol, but it would be best to not do such while he was supposedly in the middle of searching for the prince.

However, there were people inside his room who hampered on his delight.

“Heh, congratulations on that.”

A child’s voice could be heard from the darkness, causing Count Grimm to freeze.

The lights in the study lit up.

Inside the room, the person he had thought died was sitting on his custom-ordered leather sofa, legs crossed and grinning.

“H-h-h!”

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but I’m perfectly alive.”

“How!?”

When Grimm finally finished saying the word, Herscherik raised and lowered his shoulders in display. He then looked up at Kuro standing beside him.

“My butler is really amazing, right? But, I’m sure you already know that.”

Kuro smiled in response to Herscherik’s words then looked down at the count with a nonchalant face.

After being surrounded by those thugs, Kuro had completely annihilated the entire group in just 10 seconds.

He destroyed the approaching enemies with a single and accurate blow to their vitals. He threw the daggers he carried at those aiming at him with bows and crossbows, piercing all of them through their skulls.

After those 10 seconds, the only one able to leave the scene was Kuro.

Kuro infiltrated the flaming villa, kicked open the door to Herscherik’s sealed room, discovered Herscherik wrapped up in a blanket in the corner of the room, and jumped

out of the 3rd floor window while carrying him, successfully making an escape.

Kuro commented, "Jumping from the 3rd floor in the middle of a fire was more difficult than fighting those thugs."

Since the surrounding area was in chaos due to the fire, it was fortunate that no one saw them jumping down.

However, the jump down was just like a roller coaster, so it went without saying that Herscherik felt sick and was stuck clinging to Kuro, unable to move.

"15 people were a breeze. If you prepare twice as much next time, you could stop me for at least a minute."

Smiling, he implied a threat, "That is, if there will be a next time, heh."

Count Grimm shuddered at those words as if he was just drenched in cold water in the middle of winter and sat down on the spot. He understood that there was no escape left for him. He had no choice but to realize this. As there wasn't a single soul who had ever escaped from Shadow Fang.

"Well then, Count Grimm. I've got some things to ask you, so mind giving me answers? I mean, it's fine if you don't answer, but if you do that, you'll receive the death penalty for attempting to assassinate a member of the royal family."

The smiling prince resembled an angel, but also the devil.

"Firstly, why did you do this? There was nothing out of the ordinary when I first arrived."

At arrival, the count was fully intent on welcoming the prince in hopes of gaining favors.

But now, he had openly started a fire and attempted to assassinate the boy. How could he explain this complete change in attitude?

".....That was because... His Highness was holding the pocket watch....."

"Pocket watch? Do you mean this?"

Herscherik sensed the meaning from Grimm's weak reply and showed the pocket watch he had received from Count Luzeria. With the exception of sleeping, he had always carried it with him, not to mention it was a life-saver during the fire.

“Since that was something Count Luzeria had on him..... I had thought that His Highness was connected to Count Luzeria...”

“Ah, so that’s how it was.”

This man had met with Count Luzeria the night before the execution. He had come to press the count to hand over the proof, but the count didn’t give him anything.

Grimm had probably searched every nook and cranny of this mansion, but he couldn’t find it. He was about to give up when Herscherik showed up, carrying the same pocket watch as Count Luzeria.

“So, you planned an assassination, am I right?”

Count Grimm’s prediction wasn’t wrong.

It was true that Herscherik and Count Luzeria were connected. It was just that Herscherik wasn’t carrying what Grimm wanted, nor did he have any idea what it was. But Grimm’s ability to sense danger was quite impressive. The count had died roughly two years ago. Herscherik was 3 years old at that time, so it wouldn’t be strange to think that there was no relation between the two. He also acknowledged how useful Grimm was to the Minister.

The thing Grimm was searching for bothered Herscherik for a second, but he revised his thinking.

It wouldn’t be good if he carelessly let slip that he knew of it and allow his mind to be too caught up in this. And even if he tried to obtain it, Herscherik wasn’t sure if he would properly be able to deal with it.

Moreover, the original holder of this item was Count Luzeria who had been convicted as guilty. To present evidence from someone who had been declared guilty, although it was through false charges, even now Herscherik didn’t know how effective it would be.

Additionally, he didn’t believe he could find it either, seeing how these men searched in frenzy and still couldn’t find it.

Moreover, if information that he knew of the item was to reach the faction’s ears by chance, living to the next day may become an exceedingly difficult task. Herscherik was fully aware that he had yet to obtain the strength to oppose the minister.

And even if he did obtained information about the evidence that wasn’t here, the risk

was too high. Thus, being ignorant about this matter was his best defense against danger.

Besides, as long as he was connected, the information would certainly find its way to him one day.

Reasoning all of this in his mind, Herscherik decided to continue the conversation.

“All right. Schwartz, next.”

“As you wish.”

What Kuro was ordered to bring out of his pocket were several documents.

He spread them out to show the count. When Count Grimm recognized them, his face turned pale.

“These are!”

“Documents containing evidence of selling our country’s weapons to the enemy nation.”

Around the area of Greisis Kingdom, there was a rival empire to the kingdom.

Greisis Kingdom had a longer history, but it was currently being intimidated by the empire strengthening their military might as of recently. Not only were there small skirmishes along the border between the two, there was also the Great War 10 years ago.

These documents were a secret message from the empire. And from examining the contents, these were not the first communications.

“I was told to!”

“By who? Whatever, there are tattered pieces elsewhere as well.”

The documents Kuro presented were evidence of various frauds:

Unreasonable taxes and intimidating the citizens to pay up, a falsified petition to enter the country, and embezzlement.

And the thing that made Herscherik curious in the first place: investigation of the armory stock.

The supposedly delivered goods weren’t delivered. From there, Herscherik verified with the supplier in the castle town. It was true that the goods weren’t delivered to the castle, but instead, the destination was altered in the middle of the delivery, and

the goods were sent to the area around the national border.

Herscherik returned to the castle and immediately tried to confirm the facts, but no matter how much he investigated, he couldn't find any documents concerning the delivery destination. There were also oppositions from fellow bureaus and negligence in reporting the weapons delivery, turning this situation into disaster.

Moreover, there was the secret message from the empire inside the evidence Count Luzeria had when he was falsely arrested. Herscherik realized that no matter how forged the proof was, an original would be necessary in order to create a counterfeit document from a foreign nation.

That was why as the person who wanted Count Luzeria gone the most, Grimm was the most flustered, and thus he had doubtful eyes fixed on him.

With Kuro only having to look for evidence according to Herscherik's directions, everything was brought to light.

Each time a charge was read out loud, Count Grimm grew paler; at the end, his face was the color of dust.

"There are others doing the same..."

"Hey, do you think that if someone else is doing it, that makes it alright for you to do it as well?"

Herscherik rebuked, repulsed.

To think that it was forgivable to do it as long as there were others as well was utterly ridiculous. Such a way of thinking had disgusted Herscherik even in his past life.

Someone else had done it, so it's fine for me. In other words, you don't think for yourself; you don't have any intention to take responsibility.

Not a single responsibility lies with you. If such thoughts were filling the country, things must change.

"Please, I beg of you. Spare me! Leave me just my life!"

Count Grimm looked at the cold Herscherik and prostrated himself, rubbing his forehead on the ground.

"Whose mouth is saying that they don't want to die?"

Herscherik's tone was much too cold for a child to have. Kuro became wide-eyed at how his master's cold tone had changed the atmosphere.

"Count Luzeria died innocently. You were the one who drove him down."

To be more exactly, the ringleader used Count Grimm to drive Luzeria, but at this moment, none of that matter.

"In this world, only the strong and clever survive. The other foolish people are either used and left to die, or they rebel and die; those are the only options, right?"

"That... where did you!"

Herscherik recited each and every word from that time without making a single mistake. He forbade himself from making any mistake with those words.

"This time, you are the fool."

(He knew everything. His Highness was fully aware of everything...)

Grimm despaired. All the fortune and fame he had accumulated till now had ended. With this, all his family members would receive the death penalty.

".....Well then, in that case, Count Grimm, shall we make a deal?"

"Excuse me?"

Count Grimm raised his face at such unexpected words.

(A deal?)

He saw hope that he might be spared.

"I-I'll do anything. I pledge my allegiance to you from the bottom of my heart! Please, spare just my life!"

"Ha? We don't need your allegiance. Such a thing could be swept away like the trash it is."

Herscherik sensed Kuro from behind spitting out those words, but Herscherik chose to ignore it.

Count Grimm already had no say whatsoever in this situation. Herscherik obtained solid evidence, so if Grimm refused, there would only be death waiting for him.



While the chilly wind signaling the beginning of winter brushed up against his cheek, Herscherik smiled at the citizens who came to see him off.

“Well then, Meria, I’ll be waiting for your letters. Same with everyone else. Please inform me at any time if anything else happens.”

The citizens nodded at the prince’s each word, he who had achieved the miraculous feat of returning alive from that fire.

The incident was as follows: a group of thugs raided the villa the prince was staying at, attacking the Imperial Guards, and finally lighting the place on fire.

The corpses of the group of thugs were later discovered in the forest. While it was still unknown how the group was defeated or who defeated them, the incident was thus considered settled.

“Your Highness, take care... Thank you very much.”

Tears formed in the corner of Meria’s big, drooping, brown eyes, and Herscherik gave her a smile.

Next to her were her cousins, the co-conspirators of the kidnapping incident, who bowed so many times that it looked like their body might snap in half.

There was a reason for them to feel this grateful.

The following day after the fire, Count Grimm had notified all the citizens: *I was mistaken and will return the collected taxes. Likewise, I shall offer individual supplementary loans to whoever may find overcoming this winter to be difficult.* Even though they were called ‘loans,’ in actuality, it was the same as giving the money away without asking for any compensation.

Herscherik never spoke to the majority of the crowd awaiting him outside the local lord’s mansion, and he was fine with it. But, he did tell them to notify him if anything were to happen.

“Master Herscherik, I was blessed to have served your Highness.”

“I was also glad to have you, Meria, as my nanny. I’m sure Father, and my Mother in the Garden in Heaven, feel the same.”

After exchanging their last embrace, Herscherik boarded the carriage. He continued to wave his hand from the carriage’s small window until he was no longer able to see them.

Then, he settled his body back in his seat, breathing in as deeply as he could, and let it all out.

He had finally realized that he had been more nervous than he had imagined.

“Master Hersche, you’ve done a wonderful job.”

“Yeah. But Schwartz, I thought I told you that when it’s just the two of us, it’s fine to drop the formalities.”

The two laughed at this exchange. Yesterday was a long night.

“Was leaving Count Grimm like that alright?”

Kuro recalled last night’s events and asked Herscherik.

“.....I think that might be as good as it gets.”

It would be easy to publicize Count Grimm’s sins and take the territory away from him. But, he was unsure if the next local lord would be the right person for the citizens. That was why he thought it was best to strike a deal with the Count and keep him there where Herscherik could monitor him, until he outlived his usefulness.

Herscherik had three conditions in exchange for which he would spare Count Grimm’s life and overlook this incident:

One, be fair to the citizens on your land.

Two, immediately stop selling out our country and cut off your relationship with the enemy.

And finally, three, leak information about the Minister’s faction to him.

Leaving aside the last one, the first and second conditions had to be soundlessly fulfilled. Those two conditions determined whether or not the count could live.

If anything were to happen, the citizens would contact the prince.

If there was no regular contact coming from the people of that territory, it would be assumed that something had happened.

Additionally, Herscherik had threatened Count Grimm with something else on top of the attempted assassination and the evidence in his hand.

“You took advantage of the citizens’ planned kidnapping.”

“Well, it was his citizens, who did it, so it won’t be far off to say that he was involved, right?”

Herscherik threatened Grimm, blaming him for the kidnapping incident Meria and the others had devised and executed.

“If I were to say that they were threatened and silenced, wouldn’t Father believe it? Look, with this evidence, if I bring it up it’ll be perfect.”

Herscherik laughed innocently. But his words were stained with malice. But what Kuro wanted to hear wasn’t that.

“Is it fine to leave the matter of Count Luzeria like that?”

Kuro asked bluntly so the prince would understand the intention of his question. Count Grimm was, so to speak, Count Luzeria’s foe. As this method didn’t wipe away the dishonor smeared on Count Luzeria’s name, Kuro wondered what Herscherik was feeling about this conclusion, seeing how the prince had admired that man so much.

Herscherik was silent, as if scrutinizing Kuro’s words. Then, he slowly opened his mouth.

“I think the Count would surely say that it’s fine like this. More than his own name or land, he cherished his country... and his people.”

Otherwise, what had happened two years ago wouldn’t have occurred. As an aristocrat above all aristocrats, the proud him would have been satisfied with such a result. Herscherik believed so.

“.....I really wanted to bring the matter of Count Grimm to the public and judge him. I wanted to declare that Count Luzeria was right... But, that would just be self-satisfaction.”

It would have been easy and short-sighted to just gain vengeance with the result being his own gratification.

But, Count Grimm was nothing more than an underling. His existence could be discarded, like cutting off a lizard's tail. As such, they could not fundamentally arrive at a resolution.

"I will definitely clear the Count's sullied name. But now's not the time for that."

Determined, Herscherik continued, tightly gripping the pocket watch.

(Nevertheless, it went pretty well for the first time.)

Even with the unexpected assassination attempt, you could say that it was a success from start to finish.

No matter how much you plan for every eventuality, it may not work out; this wasn't some kind of manga or game. But the multitude of books read and games played in his past life turned out to provide some good experience to him.

In his past life, Ryouko had a habit of reading ahead.

At work, she would predict and prepare for unexpected situations, so that, if any problem were to occur, she could immediately fulfill her duty.

With her hobbies, she would almost always hit bull's eye when it comes to mystery games and detective dramas. For war games, she would read several steps ahead, calculate, and obtain an absolute victory with her team. She also had a taste for chess, shogi, and even Go.

In this world, his past life's acquired skills and experience as an office worker were useful, but depending on the way they were used, his otaku knowledge also certainly played a big part.

Besides, Ryouko was a printed-text addict, reading mountains of manga and light novels, her favorite, but also delving into hardcovers and paperbacks.

Books exposed the author's way of thinking like a mirror. It was no exaggeration to say that to read a book was to know a person. The knowledge he had obtained from the many books in his past life prepared Herscherik with a wider outlook and way of thinking than most people.

Clear and focused eyes, and an ability to judge—the knowledge from his previous life wasn't strictly intended for royalty, but it did leave an effect on Herscherik.

“.....Well then, how many years will it take?”

“Years?”

Kuro was suspicious of Herscherik’s mutterings as he watched the scenery pass by.

“There’s no way that guy, after doing such horrible things, would easily reform his ways.”

‘It’s the same for any world.’ If this left his throat, what would happen?

“Besides, if Count Grimm could no longer act, it would alert his higher-ups in the faction of some abnormality. If Count Grimm really can’t walk this tightrope, it’ll be that side that’ll make him disappear.”

There was only one path left for Count Grimm. Whether it was long or short, it would be a test of his abilities.

(The enemy isn’t as nice as me. That’s why we have to take measures until then.)

The true fight had yet to come.

Herscherik stared outside in a daze. Now, on the return trip, the inside of the moving carriage felt vastly different. Possibly because his mind was packed full of thoughts, Herscherik also forgot about his motion-sickness.

Kuro shivered, looking at the prince. It wasn’t because he was cold; nor was it because he was afraid.

(How far is he reading ahead... Was this what they call ‘unable to see even the lowest limit?’)

Kuro re-acknowledged the merits he had assigned to his master and trembled with delight:

Absolute conviction that he wouldn’t be swept away by his emotions.

Resolution to fulfill his objective even if he cannot choose the means or method.

Foresight to choose the best option, calmly reading ahead.

Yet intense emotions, never to ignore those around him.

Were these not the talents belonging to one who stands above all, the one said to be the vessel of a king or hero?

There was one more thing he saw through Herscherik's habits—
There were two times that Herscherik addresses himself as a female.

The first was when Herscherik is alone with Kuro.

The other was when Herscherik becomes cool-headed.
Cool-headed referred to his cold-hearted way of speaking, but it also referred to his moments of calmness in tense situations.

When he was kidnapped and when he was threatening Count Grimm, an aspect of this calmness had the prince unconsciously changing the pronoun he referred to himself with.

He may not look different if you glanced at him, but, his mind was racing with calculations, trying to read ahead of the situation.

Incidentally, the times he used the masculine form was when he was 'the prince'. He would always use this form when he pretended to be the harmless prince or in front of his father and the royal family.

"Hey, Kuro."

Deep in thought, Kuro was brought back to his senses by his master calling his name. In front of him was Herscherik, looking at him with a serious face.

"I want to protect Father. I want to protect my family. I want to protect this country. I want to protect its citizens. I will do anything to accomplish this wish of mine."

Kuro smiled at the prince's words, the vessel whose limit was still unknown. However, at the root of this was a tenderness that makes others sympathize, 'I just can't leave him alone.'

If you want to save just yourself, then just throw away everything, even your status as a prince. However, that thought never once crossed Herscherik's mind. It wasn't just about being kind. He was aware that kindness alone can't protect anyone or anything.

Taking a breath, Herscherik continued. He held the old, beautiful silver pocket watch and tightened his grip.

“Schwartz, being with me will be more difficult than any job you’ve ever taken up till this point.”

This wasn’t a vague prediction or his imagination.

To change a country was something unthinkable for someone like Herscherik who used to be an officer worker. If he failed, extinction was certain.

By becoming his primary butler, Kuro would be sharing the same fate as him.

Presently, Kuro could still turn back.

“I don’t have anything to give you in return. On the contrary, there would be the possibility of exposing your life to danger... despite that, would you still fight beside me?”

His master stared straight at him, unease visible on the prince’s face.

Herscherik hid his anxiety and allowed Kuro to make his choice.

Kuro asked himself again.

But no argument that would make him leave the prince existed in his mind.

Kuro suddenly realized then.

Perhaps Herscherik also allowed Count Grimm to make a decision.

Despite Herscherik saying the count wouldn’t reform, if in the unlikely event that he did change for the better, the count would become one of the citizens the prince swore to protect.

If that happened, Herscherik would protect him at any cost. Even if he was, from Count Luzeria’s perspective, an enemy.

And so, Kuro decided.

He could declare with certainty that the reason why he hadn’t had a master up till now was because he was waiting for the prince. Just as the prince ‘couldn’t leave anyone alone,’ Kuro also ‘couldn’t leave’ the prince alone.

Kuro knelt on knee and bowed his head.

Since they were inside the carriage, the distance between the two was very small.

“My body is the sword that tears your enemies to pieces, the shield that protects you from the assassins’ daggers, and the cane that supports you.”

Those were the same words Count Luzeria had pledged to Herscherik.

When Kuro became a primary butler, he had learned the royal family’s customs and etiquette from Luke.

At that time, he thought they were simply words.

But, Kuro revised that thought.

These words were a oath straight from the heart, a covenant where deviations were unforgivable.

“My lord, if you wish so, I shall accompany you to enemy lands housing hundreds of thousands of enemy soldiers, to the ends of the sky, and even to the Depths of the Earth.”

When Kuro raised his face, his master before him had his eyes wide open in surprise.

“Please, I ask that you permit me this.”

Herscherik closed his eyes, and when he reopened them, he fixed his gaze on Kuro.

The fresh green eyes met the dark ruby ones.

“Schwartz, I will allow it. However, I want you to promise me just one thing.”

Saying that, Herscherik placed the old, beautiful silver pocket watch on the seat and with his empty hands, he held Kuro’s face like how he had done to his niece in his dream.

It was the manifestation of his feeling to not let this promise change, to not want it to change.

“I won’t allow you to die before I do. Know that when you die is when I will die.”

He didn't want to say farewell like with Count Luzeria.

He didn't want to lose anyone dear to him again. He knew that this promise was just for his own satisfaction. Still, Herscherik couldn't help but say it.

He sensed the light residing in Kuro's dark red eyes.

"As you command, my lord."

Final Chapter

Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom of Sorrow

Today was the celebratory banquet in honor of Greisis Kingdom's 7th Prince's 5th birthday.

(There really is a 7-5-3 tradition here.....)

He and his father, the king, greeted the guests who arrived. Incidentally, the greetings from the royal family just concluded. The queen, princes, and princess had somehow evolved to become even more beautiful than they were two years ago, and meeting them face-to-face again landed the same critical blow to Herscherik's pride as last time, smashing it to dust.

(I'd thought that after being unable to win against them two years ago, I would finally be able to climb onto the same stage, but it really is impossible!)

It would be inevitable for any person's feelings to turn sour at that. He was still plain compared to his father and brothers. There were no flowers around him. Additionally, he had neither magical power nor motor reflexes. It might be because the basis of his comparison was wrong, but from other people's perspective, he was acknowledged to be the disappointing prince.

Incidentally, while his other siblings participated in this banquet, it was customary for someone as young as him to be quickly returned to his room as soon as the greetings were over.

"Master Hersche."

While the prince was lost in his thoughts, Kuro called out to him from behind. Herscherik's gaze was led by Kuro's line of sight and fell upon the person he wanted to see the most at the banquet.

"Father, I wish to excuse myself for a bit."

Receiving his father's permission, Herscherik went forward. Of course, with Kuro

following a few steps back.

“Count Grimm, thank you for last year.”

The prince showed a carefree smile at the count who was cowering in the corner of the venue, wary of all the surrounding gazes.

The prince looked like he had a shining halo around him as he smiled, but the count trembled and retreated a few steps away. He had on a face drained of all hope, as if he just met the devil.

“Count, are you in bad health? Shall I have Schwartz bring you something?”

Herscherik looked up at Kuro. Now aware of Kuro’s presence, Count Grimm trembled even more, his complexion moving past pale into pure white.

“Count, you truly aren’t feeling well. I had asked about the situation from everyone on your land. Meria’s letter said that you’ve treated them so well. There may be troubles on your land in the future, so please do your best.”

The count nodded again and again like a doll to the smiling Herscherik. After a quick valediction, he hurried away from the venue.

“.....It looked like he was really unnerved until he heard me speak.”

“You had such a splendid smile on, Master Hersche. Count Grimm’s face looked like he’d just met the Gatekeepers at the Depths of the Earth.”

“Kuro, that’s definitely not a compliment.”

(Well, it’s not like he’s wrong. The count turned pure white when he saw Kuro’s face. He’d lost more hair compared to last time. And I don’t think I was just imagining that he’d thinned as well.)

Herscherik had saved Count Grimm two-fold—from both his crime and obesity. He thought that this was something worthy of praise.

He thought so, but was called by his father before he could voice his assessment, and returned to his seat.

And right before his eyes was a man, one who still had the same presence as two years ago: Minister Barbasse. Barbasse looked the same as last time and hadn’t gained any excess weight, unlike Count Grimm.

“It’s been a while, your Highness Herscherik. I’m glad to see you in good health.”
“Minister, you also haven’t changed.”

(Fatten then lose your hair, you damn geezer.)

Hiding his feelings, Herscherik responded with a smile. The business smile he’d cultivated in his past life still had uses here.

“I was informed not that long ago by Count Grimm that you had visited his land last year... Did something happen?”

The Minister resembled a raptor eyeing his prey as he looked at Herscherik, but the prince pretended he hadn’t noticed.

“Yes, I had some private business to attend there. But I was attacked by burglars in the middle of the night... Fortunately, my life was saved, thanks to the Imperial Guards and Count Grimm’s efforts. However, I feel guilty that some of the knights were sacrificed in order to protect me.”

Herscherik avoided the Minister’s eyes that were searching for a light by plastering on a sorrowful expression.

He really did feel bad for the knights, but he felt an even worse sense of guilty for using them like this.

“Is that so? But it is quite deplorable to know that there are such burglars in our country. I must take countermeasures against them immediately.”

“Yes, please do that!”

Herscherik’s sorrowful look turned into a relieved one.

But if the inside of his heart were to be spoken as words, it went without saying that he would let loose a storm of curses that would need to be censored.

“.....Hersche, aren’t you tired?”

After the minister left, Herscherik’s father asked, worried.

Rather than in being a question about fatigue, he seemed to be referring to something else. As such Herscherik finally showed a real smile.

“I’m fine!..... Father, if you’re tired, please tell me, alright?”

To relieve his father, Herscherik gripped his cold hand and continued to speak.

“While I’m still young and unreliable, as long as I’m next to you Father, I can handle it.”

The primary butlers standing behind the king and prince exchanged looks with each other at those words.

Luke nodded in approval and Kuro smiled proudly, but their voiceless conversation went unnoticed by Herscherik due to his position.

The mature words from his youngest prince made the king’s eyes open wide for a second, but he immediately smiled and nodded. He used his free hand to lovingly run it through his son’s blonde hair.

If this was an otome game and Herscherik was his past life’s self Ryouko, there was no doubt that this would be when the king would propose. Without a doubt, she would buy all his figurines and illustrations; this was the kind of smile Soleil had right now.

Herscherik released his father’s hand and surveyed the venue.

When he was three, this was where he found himself before a crossroads.

He gripped the outside of the pocket holding the old, beautiful silver pocket watch.

He had thought that he’d grown a bit within these two years.

(Count Luzeria... I’ll protect them. Everything you wanted to protect, I’ll do it.)

He would protect this great Greisis Kingdom, known as “The Kingdom of Sorrow” from the sneaky neighboring countries.

In his past life, Hayakawa Ryouko died at the age of 34.

In his new life, he had become the 7th and youngest prince of the Greisis Kingdom, Herscherik Greisis, now aged 5.

What awaited him in the future was by no means an easy path.

But, future historians would write that his existence to the country was but a faint

light, like a strand of his blonde hair falling from the dark clouds shrouding the sky, but certainly a ray of hope.

Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom of Sorrow (End)

Author's notes: Thank you so much for sticking with me this far.

Truthfully, the plan for uploading this novel was going to take double the amount of time, but so many people have visited it, registered it as their favorite, rated it, and gave their impressions. While doing that may be something so simple, I'm delighted so let's keep going strong until the end! Thank you for letting me get this pumped up.

For the time being, the volume "Kingdom of Sorrow" is complete, but I plan to return at any time to correct any typos and make revisions.

Currently, I am in the middle of working my butt off writing the next volume.

It may take some time, but I intend to give it my all so that everyone here can see the hard-working protagonist, his butler, and the other characters again.

Since I want to tie up loose ends, reveal princes who haven't shown up yet, and make you speechless with things like the other country and the villains.

I hope to see you all again in the next volume!

Everyone who's cheered me up till now and everyone who's enjoyed it, thank you very much.

PS: I decided to accept impressions on completed works. Those who wish to write their impressions, I ask to first take a look at my page.

2014/1/26 Kusunoki Nobiru

Translator (Caelum): Guys, we did it! Volume 1 is completed! Just like the author mentioned, I want to thank you guys for tolerating with my slow pace and hope that you continue to stick with us for the volumes to come. All the comments and praises brought a huge grin to my face whenever I read them, so here's my turn to bow my head in return.

Editor (SimoB): Guys, guys, guys =_=... real talk! How excited are you for the next volume? If you're not CRAZY excited, then GET OUT!!! I'm joking, I'm joking! *grabs

your legs* OAQ PLEASE DON'T LEAVE!!! Thank you so much for enjoying this volume of the story with us! Let's find out together what happens next!!!! See you in the next chapter! \o/





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